

Report # 111

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 12th- 19th March

Presentation: 24th March

(OUT LINE)

Iraq

Egypt

Political front:

- Egypt opposition groups call for reform
- NDP denies deal with opposition to exclude ElBaradei, Brotherhood
- Anxiety on succession in Egypt as Mubarak recovers

Geo strategic front:

- Egypt arrests Israeli journalist along the border
- Settlement expansion 'endangers' Mideast talks, says EU's Ashton
- Israeli reporter quizzed by Egyptian military
- US envoy cancels Mideast trip, Israel feud deepens
- Arab world says hopes in Obama are dwindling

Economic front:

- Mideast PE firms eye financing sources
- Egyptian property boosted by Europe bank bonuses
- Egypt: Stimulus pressure
- ANALYSIS: Premature optimism for Egypt's economy?
- OCI net rises, fertilizer outlook positive

Social front

- Mubarak names successor to late Al-Azhar cleric: report
- Cairo hosts donor conference to rebuild Darfur
- Opposition Party criticizes Egyptian newspaper
- Islam Online sit-in continues after mass resignation
- Egypt listed as 'enemy of the internet'

- Over 300 Islam Online employees resign
- Islam Online dispute continues after calls for general meeting
- Will campaign efforts register with voters?
- Court supports women judges at final Egypt hold-out
- Police arrests Muslim Brotherhood students in anti-Israel protests

Iraq

Political front:

Elections

- Iraqi PM Leads Vote In Basra
- Maliki Leads Partial Vote Count In Baghdad
- Maliki Coalition Ahead In Early Iraqi Vote Count
- Iraq Vote Count Shows Maliki, Allawi Neck And Neck
- Iran Praises Iraq Election As Shi'ite Ally Leads
- Iraq's Kurds Lose Political Dominance In Kirkuk
- Is Iraq returning to its secular roots
- Iraq: Preliminary Surprise in the Parliamentary Polls
- The Kurds Rule Baghdad
- The Iraq Era
- Positive Aspects of the Iraqi Elections

Geo strategic front

- Iraq's governor asks for international tribunal to investigate minority violations
- Iraq lashes out at European countries repatriating refugees by force

Economic front

Social front

- Annual U.S. Rights Report Cites Suffering Of War-Zone Civilians
- U.S. denies trading in Iraqi prisoners' body organs
- Scores of fleeing Christian families return to Mosul
- Violence surge in restive Iraq's Mosul and Falluja

Lebanon

Political front

- March 14 submits seven-point plan to protect Lebanon

Geo strategic front

- Beirut rejects Tripoli's invite to Arab summit
- Jumblatt says his criticism of Syria was improper
- Lebanon's Jumblatt makes overtures to Syria
- Israel, Hezbollah rhetoric raises spectre of new war
- Arab-Israeli conflict root of all our wars: Hariri
- Palestinian Armed Struggle chief insists on retaining position in Lebanon camps
- UN plays down risk of renewed Lebanon-Israel strife
- Hezbollah: Syria wants to open new page with Jumblatt

Economic front

- Lebanon yet to receive official invite to Libya Arab Summit
- Lebanon to snub Arab League summit: official

Social front

- World's richest man, Carlos Slim, visits Lebanon

Palestine

- Fatah and Hamas Trade Accusations Over Jerusalem Clashes
- Jailed Fateh Leader Gets PHD
- U.S. envoy George Mitchell cancels his visit to Israel amidst U.S-Israeli diplomatic crisis

Summary

Egypt

Political front:

Several Egyptian opposition groups called for political reforms and more freedoms in a statement on Monday at the end of a three-day conference, the official news agency MENA reported. The groups, which include established opposition parties such as the leftist Tagammu and the liberal Al-Wafd, demanded an end to the concentration of power in the president's hands and reforms to laws that place restrictions on parties. They also called for peaceful protests ahead of parliamentary polls due in October.

The National Democratic Party (NDP) has denied accusations of a secret deal struck with certain opposition parties to divide the Muslim Brotherhood's current parliamentary seats amongst them and to ignore the presidential ambitions of former IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Al-Shorouk newspaper quoted an unnamed senior NDP source as refuting claims that a deal had been struck with Al-Wafd party to coordinate efforts during the parliamentary elections set for October, saying the NDP "does not fear anyone and does not make deals for individuals."

Geo strategic front:

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said that Israel's decision to build new settler homes in east Jerusalem "endangers" indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians. "Recent Israeli decisions to build new housing units in east Jerusalem have endangered and undermined the tentative agreement to begin proximity talks," she said in Cairo where she addressed members of the Arab League. "The EU position on settlements is clear. Settlements are illegal, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two state-solution impossible," Ashton said.

Arabs across the Middle East are unconvinced the United States will stand up to Israel despite Washington's rare public outrage over plans to build new Jewish homes in a traditionally Arab part of Jerusalem. The skepticism is eroding Arab hopes that President Barack Obama will push hard for a long-sought peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians to end a conflict that has fueled anti-US sentiment in the region. America's dwindling credibility could also jeopardize another major Mideast goal — uniting the Arab world against Iran. Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, said Arab countries will be less likely to engage with the US on issues such as Iran if they get nothing in return. **Economic front:**

Private equity firms in the Middle East are looking at development financial institutions (DFIs) as an alternative to elusive bank lending, executives said. "The change in mix of funding providers — more (reliant) on development financial institutions as opposed to Western commercial banks — is going to be the theme for private equity in 2010," said Ahmed El Houssieny, managing director at Cairo-based Citadel Capital, at a conference in Dubai.

With the advent of the global financial crisis, most countries saw their construction activities grind to a halt as banks tightened lending. In this respect, Egypt is proving resilient; indeed, its cement producers are trying to keep pace with an energetic construction industry. As an anti-crisis measure, the government has aimed stimulus money at large infrastructure development projects, including water treatment plants, railways, highways and housing. Around LE 23 billion (€3.1 billion) has been issued since October 2008 to stimulate the economy, and the People's Assembly is currently pushing through another LE 10 billion (€1.35 billion) in stimulus cash, which will be financed by the sale of land plots. This construction surge should help push the GDP growth rate above 5 percent in the 2009/10 fiscal year, after registering 4.7 percent in 2008/09.

Social front

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak appointed a new head of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's most prestigious institution, after the death of its top cleric last week, the official MENA agency reported. Mubarak, who is recovering from surgery in Germany, "has issued a

presidential decree appointing Sheikh Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed Al-Tayeb to head Al-Azhar," MENA reported.

International donors are to gather in Egypt's capital with a \$2 billion target for the reconstruction of Darfur, Sudan's western region devastated by a seven-year war. The one-day conference has been organized by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which groups 57 members to form the world's largest Islamic assembly, and is to be co-chaired by host Egypt and Turkey. Around 25 non-OIC member states and 50 international organizations and NGOs have also been invited to take part. The \$2 billion which the conference aims to raise is to finance in cooperation with Khartoum a long list of development projects in agriculture, water supply, health and education. "The conference aims to send a clear message to the international community that development is a key factor in achieving peace and stability in Darfur," the host nation said in a statement. Aid to Darfur has so far concentrated on humanitarian and relief efforts. But organizers are trying to shift gear by working on a more long-term vision for Darfur through development and reconstruction projects.

Employees of the Islam Online (IOL) website continued their sit-in for the third day running at their Sixth of October offices, demanding their settlement packages after the majority of them submitted their resignation. A source from IOL who spoke on condition of anonymity said, "Qatar has reneged on the deal for the severance packages. A lawyer is currently present to discuss legal rights." IOL employees started a strike after warnings of mass layoffs and employee investigations by the funder of the site, Qatar's Al-Balagh Foundation. It was also announced that their contracts, which expire at the end of March, would not be renewed. A total of 300 employees submitted their resignations Tuesday after being told it was the only way to ensure they receive severance packages.

Egypt was listed as an "enemy of the internet" by Reporters Without Borders as a US State Department 2009 report on human rights highlighted Egypt's ill-treatment of bloggers and internet activists in 2009. The internet has become a "battlefield for supporters and opponents of fundamental human rights," the US State Department report said.

The majority of Islam Online (IOL) Egypt's 330 staff submitted their resignation following a two-day sit-in spurred by warnings of mass lay-offs and employee investigations by the website's Qatari owner.

The dispute between the Egyptian office of Islam Online (IOL) and the board of its funding foundation in Qatar continued even after two members of the board were suspended and a general meeting was called for to resolve the issue. Though it seemed that it was the end of the line for the 330 employees of IOL in Egypt, matters took a turn Wednesday night when the board of the Qatari Al Balagh Foundation, headed by Sheikh Yousef El-Qaradawi, voted to suspend the membership of two members who were allegedly behind the plans to relocate the office to Qatar.

Iraq

Political front: Elections

A list led by Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had a wide lead in early results from the southern oil hub of Basra a week after Iraq's parliamentary election, the country's electoral commission said on March 14.

With nearly 80 percent of the votes counted from Iraq's March 7 parliamentary elections, the main winners appear to be Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and challenger Iyad Allawi.

But the two front-runners are neck and neck. The vote count so far shows Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah coalition narrowly ahead of Maliki's State of Law alliance by less than 9,000 votes. The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of Shi'ite religious groups, looks set to come in third, followed by the Kurdistan Alliance, composed of the two main factions in the autonomous Kurdish region. With 20 percent of the vote remaining to be counted, the balance between the two front-runners still could easily tip either way. **Coalition Talk** But what appears almost certain is that neither will be able to amass enough seats in parliament to rule alone. Already in Baghdad the talk is all about coalition building, and which party will partner with others. One senior candidate with the Al-Iraqiyah list, Intisar Allawi, a relative of Allawi, said on March 16 that the group held "very good and positive talks" with the Iraqi National Alliance and with the Kurdistan Alliance. At the same time, Prime Minister Maliki has invited all parties in Iraq to join negotiations with his State of Law alliance.

Iran has congratulated Iraqis over an election that is likely to keep a bloc led by its Shi'ite ally, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in power after a campaign in which Tehran's influence was a divisive issue. Maliki's main challenger, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who headed a secular list mixing Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs, made a high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia during the campaign to improve ties with Iran's biggest Sunni rival in the Persian Gulf region. "All international supervision has confirmed the soundness of the Iraqi elections. This is a success and we congratulate Iraqis," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a weekly press briefing on English-language state television. "We hope we'll be able to see the formation of the new government as soon as possible...the whole region will benefit from security in Iraq." Early results from the March 7 parliamentary vote show Maliki's State of Law bloc ahead in seven of 18 provinces, while strong Sunni Arab support has propelled Allawi's secularist Al-Iraqiyah list into second.

The results from the general elections indicate that the sectarian equation brought about in the aftermath of the occupation of Baghdad may no longer hold. We have seen Iraqis rallying behind groups which puts national interests above sectarianism. Some even go on saying that the equation has lost its balance. The evidence they cite are the results in provinces such as Nineveh, Salahuddeen, Anbar and Diyala where the electorate chose a secular coalition at the expense of an Islamist party. On the other hand, there are many who say that some other political blocs have preserved their standing by relying on sectarian support. These people add that the coalition of the State of the Law headed by outgoing Prime Minister Noor al-Maliki and the National Coalition are none but sectarian formations. This is evident in the overwhelming support they obtained in certain provinces. In the meantime, even those entertaining hopes for the emergence of a secular state, have their doubts.

Partial results from the Iraqi parliamentary election indicate that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's ruling State of Law bloc is leading in Baghdad and the provinces to the south. The big surprise has been the victories of al-Maliki's main rival, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, whose al-Iraqiya list seems to be sweeping the Sunni regions along Baghdad's northern rim. The rise of al-Iraqiya, along with the fact that al-Maliki hasn't completely dominated the Shiite south, suggests that he will have a hard time cobbling together a coalition government that is Shiite-dominated and has a reasonable degree of Sunni representation.

Regardless of whether it is Nuri al Maliki's or Iyad Allawi's bloc that will emerge victorious in the Iraqi elections, initial indications up until the publication of this article show that Allawi has won Arab Sunni governorates and al Maliki has won Arab Shia governorates. In geographical terms, Allawi has won western Iraq and some of its northern parts, whereas al Maliki has won southern Iraq and most of the central areas of the country. So the fight for Baghdad, the jewel of the Iraqi crown, continues. Either al Maliki or Allawi will win the majority of votes but whoever wins would have done so by the skin of his teeth. What's striking is that in the electoral programs of competing lists they all praise national unity and reject sectarianism.

The Governor of the Province of Nineveh has asked the United Nations and the European Union to undertake an international investigation into attacks targeting Iraqi minorities in his province. Atheel al-Nujaifi said violence against minorities in Nineveh, of which the northern city of Mosul is the capital, has surged recently. He said Christians were being forced to flee and some of them have been killed. Other minorities like the Shebek and Yazidis are under immense pressure and targets of mounting violence, he said.

Social front

The U.S. State Department's annual human rights report says more than 30 wars and armed conflicts around the world are fueling human rights abuses, including what it calls "an alarming number of reports of torture, extrajudicial killings, and other violations of universal human rights." The annual report, which is mandated by U.S. Congress, is actually 194 individual country reports on human rights practices, which are researched and written to provide what the State Department says is "the most comprehensive record available of the condition of human rights around the world." The reports criticize or praise the human rights records of U.S. friends and foes alike.

Lebanon

Political front

Protecting Lebanon was the focus of the March 14 alliance meeting at the Bristol Hotel on Sunday. March 14 General Secretariat Coordinator Fares Soueid briefed the press after the gathering, which he said was aimed at guaranteeing the well-being of all Lebanese, despite their political and sectarian differences. "Protecting Lebanon is a national, Arab and international responsibility," he said. Regionally, Lebanon is threatened by Israel, according to Soueid. It refuses to work towards peace and continues to build settlements, he added. He also cited Iran's nuclear program as a danger to the country and region. "We want to see the country united and free, fully Lebanese and fully Arab," Soueid added. Despite any mistakes that were made, the Cedar Revolution will continue until its goals are achieved, the March 14 General Secretariat coordinator said. With that, Soueid introduced a seven-point plan to "preserve the safety of the Lebanese people," and called on the Lebanese to develop and elaborate on it.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is ready to turn a page on the past by meeting Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Hezbollah, which is mediating between the former arch-foes, said on Monday. The Lebanese Shiite group's leader Hassan Nasrallah "has advised Jumblatt that given recent developments, the Syrian authorities will forget the past and open a new page," it said in a statement. "President Assad will receive him in Damascus during a visit on a date to be announced in the coming days," Hezbollah added. The announcement came two days after the Druze leader admitted he had made

"inappropriate and unreasonable remarks about President Assad at a time of internal tensions and extreme division within Lebanon.

Economic front

Lebanon is yet to receive an official invite to the Arab Summit that will be held in Libya at the end of this month. It has been confirmed that Lebanese President Michel Sleiman will not attend the summit. The Lebanese President previously told Asharq Al-Awsat that this subject is "problematic" and denied the option of taking part.

Detailed news:

Egypt

Political front:

Egypt opposition groups call for reform

Agencies: March 16, 2010: Several Egyptian opposition groups called for political reforms and more freedoms in a statement on Monday at the end of a three-day conference, the official news agency MENA reported. The groups, which include established opposition parties such as the leftist Tagammu and the liberal Al-Wafd, demanded an end to the concentration of power in the president's hands and reforms to laws that place restrictions on parties. They also called for peaceful protests ahead of parliamentary polls due in October. "Because of lack of democracy and mono-rule, Egyptians' lives are getting worse with the collapse of public services, spread of poverty, unemployment and corruption," said the statement. Egypt has been ruled since 1981 by President Hosni Mubarak. In 2005 he allowed multi-candidate elections which he won overwhelmingly but election observers said at the time there were irregularities in the polls. In parliamentary elections the same year, police closed down polling stations and judges who oversaw the election said some results were rigged in favour of government candidates. Police often target members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood group, which controls a fifth of seats in parliament after it ran candidates as independents in the 2005 election. Aside from the Muslim Brotherhood, opposition groups in the country command little power, but dissidents have been galvanized by a new reform group founded by former UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohammed ElBaradei. Last month ElBaradei flew to Cairo to a rapturous welcome from supporters and formed the National Association for Change. He has said he is prepared to run against Mubarak in the 2011 presidential election. –Agencies

NDP denies deal with opposition to exclude ElBaradei, Brotherhood

Daily News Egypt: March 15, 2010: The National Democratic Party (NDP) has denied accusations of a secret deal struck with certain opposition parties to divide the Muslim Brotherhood's current parliamentary seats amongst them and to ignore the presidential ambitions of former IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Al-Shorouk newspaper quoted an unnamed senior NDP source as refuting claims that a deal had been struck with Al-Wafd party to coordinate efforts during the parliamentary elections set for October, saying the

NDP “does not fear anyone and does not make deals for individuals.” Al-Quds Al-Araby newspaper had reported that a deal had been struck between the ruling NDP and some of the opposition parties to eliminate the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the People’s Assembly (PA) and stem support for ElBaradei’s presidential bid. “The NDP does not make deals with any opposition parties,” NDP MP Mohamed Khalil Kwaiteh told Daily News Egypt, “there are elections and these parties must take their program to the people and see if it resonates with them.” The Brotherhood holds 88 seats in the current parliament as independents, which the allegations claim would be divided between Al-Wafd, Tagammu and Nasserist parties amongst others. Al-Masry Al-Youm had reported details of the alleged deal, stating that Al-Wafd would receive 23 seats in the PA in exchange for offering no support for ElBaradei. The opposition parties in question are the same ones that have formed a bloc called The Parties of the Democratic Coalition removed from ElBaradei’s National Coalition for Change, which he formed with the majority of Egypt’s opposition movements, including the Brotherhood and the Kefaya Movement for Change. The three parties, along with the Democratic Front party, held a two-day conference which ended Sunday to discuss the future of Egyptian politics and the chances of making constitutional amendments. The four parties threatened to boycott all the upcoming elections if their demands were not met, specifically amending articles, 76, 77 and 88 of the Egyptian constitution that govern the eligibility of presidential candidates and judicial oversight of elections. The closing statement from the conference also called for a two-term limit on the presidency and the cancellation of the emergency law. It did not mention ElBaradei or his bid. These demands are similar to those proffered by ElBaradei and the other members of the National Coalition for Change, which prompted some speculation that this bloc was to directly rival ElBaradei’s within the political opposition movement. “The regime is not afraid of ElBaradei to strike deals with the opposition,” Kwaiteh said, “he is a citizen who has the right to express his opinion, but what is being reported in some newspapers is not true.” However, member of the leftist Tagammu party’s general secretariat Ashraf El Hefny previously told Daily News Egypt that they did not reject ElBaradie, but had concerns over his economic policies and his position vis-à-vis Israel. “We want to know his position towards Israel and privatization. It can’t just be about replacing [President Hosni] Mubarak with someone else with no change [in policy],” he said.

Anxiety on succession in Egypt as Mubarak recovers

Agence France-Presse: March 17, 2010 Ten days after Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak underwent surgery in Germany, there is growing uncertainty over his state of health and increased talk about who will eventually succeed him. On Tuesday, state television aired footage of the president for the first time since his gall bladder was removed on March 6, showing Mubarak sitting at a small table in a hospital room and talking to two doctors. Markus Buchler, who heads the medical team that performed the surgery, told reporters the president “was upbeat and in very good spirits as usual.” “I am happy to say that his medical and general condition is improving in a satisfactory manner,” he said. But there was no indication when Mubarak, who delegated authority to Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif temporarily, would leave hospital. Despite the almost daily upbeat statements on the president's convalescence, anxiety over his health led to a drop on the Egyptian stock exchange. The index fell 2.4 percent on Sunday and 3.8 percent on Monday before clawing back some of the losses on Tuesday with a 1.5 percent gain.

Eissa Fathi, the manager of Strategic Company for Securities, attributed the rise to news that the president was expected to make an appearance on Egyptian television. "This trend is expected to continue, especially because the drop that happened (on Sunday and Monday) was random," he told AFP. Analysts say the president's health, usually a closely guarded secret that has led to journalists being punished for questioning it, has intensified talk over his eventual succession. "We face many questions. What would happen if harm befell the president, or whether he could carry out his role until the end of his fifth term," said Emad Gad, an analyst with the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Mubarak, president since 1981, has no vice president. He has not indicated whether he will run for president again next year, only telling a party member at a convention: "God Willing." The expression could have been meant either a yes or a polite evasion. His son Gamal has not commented on widespread speculation that he would succeed his father. "There is widespread anxiety in Egypt and the drop in the stock exchange indicated that. There is lack of certainty on how power will be transferred and talk on the post-Mubarak period has started," Gad said. Like many analysts, Gad does not believe the 46-year-old Gamal, a former investment banker who now holds an influential policy making post in his father's National Democratic Party, has much chance of becoming next president. "I doubt the Gamal Mubarak scenario. The security and military apparatuses know there is discontent towards inheritance of power, especially with increased talk of the prodigality of those around him and suspicions of corruption by those around him," Gad said. He said he doubted the transfer of the post of commander-in-chief to an unpopular man who, unlike all the country's presidents until now, does not have a military background. Gad said a more likely scenario would be the military and the country's powerful security services agreeing on a candidate, who would run as an independent, which would require support from 250 parliamentarians. Amr Shobaki, another analyst with the Ahram center, said Mubarak was not likely to run for another term because of his age and health. The most probable outcome, he said, "was an alternative from a government apparatus that the military and security agree on." Several people have been talked about as successors, including the powerful head of intelligence, Omar Suleiman. Another possible candidate, Mohammed ElBaradei, the former chief UN nuclear watchdog, has popular support and leadership capabilities, Shobaki said. But he is not supported by government agencies and at any rate has conditioned running on constitutional reforms that Mubarak has dismissed. Still, his arrival on the Egyptian political scene has diminished Gamal's chances, said Mustapha Kamel, an American University of Cairo political science professor. "The entry of a person such as ElBaradei in the circle of those concerned with presidential nomination has made it difficult to think of Gamal Mubarak, because there is no comparison in terms of experience and national weight," he said.

Geo strategic front:

Egypt arrests Israeli journalist along the border

Associated Press : March 15, 2010 Egyptian security officials arrested an Israeli journalist as he tried to sneak across the porous Israeli-Egyptian border with African migrants, his newspaper reported Monday. An Egyptian security official said the Israeli had no identification papers or money but told his investigators he was reporting on African migrants sneaking into Israel from Egypt. The Haaretz newspaper identified the man as one of its reporters, Yotam Feldman, but said he had taken a leave of absence to

work on a story for an Israeli TV station. A statement from the station, Channel 10, confirmed that Feldman was preparing a feature on "the infiltration of refugees into Israel" and said the station was in direct contact with the Israeli embassy in Cairo and the Israeli military. The Israeli military said it was trying to secure the man's release. A medical official in the Egyptian city of Rafah said the 30-year-old Israeli hurt his hand on the barbed wire fence as he tried to cross the border. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the arrest. Smugglers help thousands of African migrants to cross into Israel every year from Egypt. Would-be border crossers travel thousands of miles and pay about \$400 to Bedouin smugglers to sneak them across the border on foot, according to Israeli groups who try to help the migrants. The crossings usually happen late at night to avoid detection by Egyptian border guards, who have been criticized by the United Nations and other international agencies for shooting at migrants as they attempt to breach the border into Israel. Around 60 have been shot dead trying to cross, according to the UN. Over the past few years, the number of illegal migrants attempting to cross into Israel has spiked. Most come from Sudan and the horn of Africa, and many attempt to secure political asylum once they arrive. The number of African asylum-seekers in Israel is around 20,000. The refugees pose a unique policy problem for the Jewish state, setting off debate over how Israel can fulfill its international obligation to provide sanctuary for refugees without paving the way for further waves of African migrants. Israel's government has said that most of the migrants are not fleeing war but are rather looking for work. Israel has taken steps to crack down on illegal entry, announcing a plan to deport all illegal immigrants within the country by 2013. In January, the government also announced plans to build two walls along the border with Egypt, partly to stem the flow of migrants. –Ashraf Sweilam contributed to this report from Al-Arish

Settlement expansion 'endangers' Mideast talks, says EU's Ashton

AFP March 15, 2010: EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said on Monday that Israel's decision to build new settler homes in east Jerusalem "endangers" indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians. "Recent Israeli decisions to build new housing units in east Jerusalem have endangered and undermined the tentative agreement to begin proximity talks," she said in Cairo where she addressed members of the Arab League. "The EU position on settlements is clear. Settlements are illegal, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two state-solution impossible," Ashton said. Israel's interior ministry announced on Tuesday that 1,600 new homes for Jewish settlers would be built in predominantly Arab east Jerusalem, triggering fury among Arab and Palestinian leaders. But Ashton said peace was nonetheless achievable. "Peace is necessary, it is urgent and it is achievable. I am here to add the full weight of the European Union to reaching this goal," she said. Israel's March 9 green light for the new construction in east Jerusalem's Ramat Shlomo raised doubts over the outlook for indirect peace talks the Palestinians had reluctantly agreed to hold with Israel just days earlier. The announcement also came during a visit to Israel by US Vice President Joe Biden, dealing a heavy blow to months of US-led efforts to relaunch talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Direct negotiations collapsed after Israel launched a devastating 22-day military offensive against the Hamas-run Gaza Strip aimed at halting Palestinian rocket fire. Ashton is on a visit to Egypt as she begins a tour which will also take her to Israel,

Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Syria before attending a meeting of the Middle East Quartet in Moscow. – AFP

Israeli reporter quizzed by Egyptian military

AFP: March 16, 2010 EL-ARISH: Egyptian military prosecutors were interrogating an Israeli journalist on Tuesday after arresting him at the border as he tried to cross illegally with an African migrant, a security source said, adding the journalist risks a military trial. Yotam Feldman and the Ghanian were arrested on Sunday along a route used by smugglers who help African migrants into Israel, officials said. The security source said military prosecutors decided to interrogate Feldman because they had doubts about his account of accompanying the migrant to do a report for Israel's Channel 10 television. A spokesman for the channel told AFP Feldman was in Egypt for a report on African migrants and the channel was asking for his release. The security source said the prosecution would decide whether to commit Feldman, 30, to trial before a military court on charges of illegally crossing the border, which could lead to a sentence of one year in prison. Military courts are presided over by an officer and allow no right of appeal, but they may decide to suspend a sentence. The Sinai desert border between Egypt and Israel has become a major trafficking route for migrants from Africa seeking opportunities in Israel. Egypt has stepped up controls on the 250-kilometer border but has drawn criticism from human rights watchdogs for its readiness to use force to prevent illegal crossings. Its police have killed dozens of African migrants in the past few years as they tried to cross the border. On Sunday, the Israeli government gave final approval for the construction of a barrier along the border in a bid to curb the entry of illegal immigrants. –AFP

US envoy cancels Mideast trip, Israel feud deepens

Associated Press : March 16, 2010: A US envoy's postponement of his Mideast trip appeared Tuesday to deepen one of the worst US-Israeli feuds in memory — even as Israel's foreign minister signaled his government had no intention of curtailing the contentious construction at the heart of the row. Hundreds of Palestinians hurled rocks at police and set tires and garbage bins ablaze across the holy city's volatile eastern sector, where the construction is planned. Plumes of black smoke billowed and the air reeked of tear gas in the heaviest clashes in the city in months. Youths in one east Jerusalem neighborhood hoisted a giant Palestinian flag and shouted, "We'll die in Palestine, Palestine will live." Thousands of police, including anti-riot units armed with assault rifles, stun grenades and batons, were deployed across occupied east Jerusalem to stifle the unrest. No serious injuries were reported. The diplomatic crisis erupted last week after Israel announced during a visit by Vice President Joe Biden that it would build 1,600 apartments for Jews in disputed east Jerusalem, the sector of the holy city that the Palestinians claim for a future capital. The announcement enraged Palestinians, who have threatened to bow out of US-brokered peace talks that were supposed to begin in the coming days. The Obama administration, fuming over what it called the "insulting" Israeli conduct, has demanded that Israel call off the project. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman told Israel Radio that demands to halt Israeli construction there "are unreasonable" and predicted the row with the US would blow over, saying neither side had an interest in escalation. But Washington notified Israel early Tuesday that envoy George Mitchell had put off his trip indefinitely. Mitchell had planned on coming to wrap up preparations for relaunching Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. But now it's not clear when the indirect talks, to be mediated by Mitchell, will begin. Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu has apologized for the timing of the project's approval, but he has not said it would be canceled. On Monday, he defended four decades of Jewish construction in east Jerusalem and said it "in no way" hurts Palestinians. The feud is feeding already high tensions in east Jerusalem, where Jews and Palestinians live together uneasily. The violence also threatened to spread to the West Bank. At the main checkpoint between the West Bank and Jerusalem, dozens of Palestinian teens threw rocks and a few firebombs at Israeli troops, who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. In east Jerusalem, security forces, some on horseback, charged a group of more than 100 youths, who had set garbage bins afire and lobbed rocks at police. Palestinian merchants shuttered their stores, and Palestinian schools in the city were closed. The Palestinian rescue service said six people were lightly injured. Israeli police said 39 people were arrested, including eight minors. Palestinian officials called on the public to defend Muslim religious interests in Jerusalem following the rededication Monday of a historic synagogue in the Jewish quarter of the Old City. The rededication has stoked recurring but unsubstantiated rumors that Jewish extremists are planning to take over the hilltop shrine at the crux of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The site, known to Jews as Temple Mount, was home to the biblical Jewish temples and is Judaism's holiest site. Muslims call it the Noble Sanctuary and it hosts the Al-Aqsa mosque complex, Islam's third-holiest shrine. But the outbreak of violence also appeared to reflect deeper frustration amid a yearlong standstill in peace efforts. Palestinians, who number about 250,000 in occupied east Jerusalem, see the building of new settlements and the presence of some 180,000 Jews there as a grave challenge to their claims to the territory. Israel annexed east Jerusalem after capturing it from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast war. Most Israelis accept the Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem as part of Israel, and previous peace proposals have allowed them to remain in Israeli hands. But the international community does not recognize the annexation and considers the Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem as illegal settlements. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said the growing crisis has highlighted Israel's defiance of the international community. "I'm really pleased with the fact that the international community and the US now have a realization of the side that is trying to obstruct the peace process," he said. The rift has presented Netanyahu with a predicament. If he doesn't make gestures toward the US, he risks further antagonizing Israel's most important ally, but he could see his hawkish governing coalition crumble if he compromises on Jerusalem. Continued confrontation is also risky for President Barack Obama, who risks setting off a fight with Congress if he pushes Israel too hard. A bipartisan parade of influential US lawmakers and interest groups has taken aim at the administration's decision to publicly condemn Israel. —AP writers Diaa Hadid and Dalia Nammati contributed to this report from Jerusalem and writers Karin Laub and Mohammed Daraghme reported from the West Bank.

Arab world says hopes in Obama are dwindling

Associated Press: March 18, 2010 Arabs across the Middle East are unconvinced the United States will stand up to Israel despite Washington's rare public outrage over plans to build new Jewish homes in a traditionally Arab part of Jerusalem. The skepticism is eroding Arab hopes that President Barack Obama will push hard for a long-sought peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians to end a conflict that has fueled anti-US sentiment in the region. America's dwindling credibility could also jeopardize another major Mideast goal — uniting the Arab world against Iran. Paul Salem, director of the

Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, said Arab countries will be less likely to engage with the US on issues such as Iran if they get nothing in return. "A lot of the Arab countries already in the last year saw that there wasn't much delivery from the US on the Israeli side," Salem told The Associated Press. "So why engage, why compromise, from their point of view?" The United States has been working for more than a year to get Israel and the Palestinians negotiating again, and Washington strongly criticized Israel's plans, announced last week, to build 1,600 apartments in disputed east Jerusalem. Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war, and Palestinians claim the sector as a capital of a future state. The building plan touched off the worst US-Israeli diplomatic feud in decades. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called the announcement an insult. US envoy George Mitchell, who had hoped to wrap up preparations for relaunching Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, called off a visit to the region. But Clinton was quick to soften her tone, saying there is "a close, unshakable bond between the United States and Israel and between the American and Israeli people." Such rhetoric fuels Arab doubts that Washington will press its ally to make concessions widely seen as necessary for any final peace deal with the Palestinians. During a speech in Cairo in June, Obama called for a complete settlement freeze and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. But Arabs were disillusioned when his administration appeared to back down and accepted a partial 10-month freeze called by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late last year. Badei Musa, 55, a Palestinian engineer who lives in Dubai, said he does not trust America's stated opposition to the settlements. "It's a joke," Musa said. "What's happening on the ground, that's what counts." Jordanian political analyst Oreib Rentawi said Wednesday that Arabs do not believe there is true disagreement between the United States and its longtime ally, Israel. "Arabs consider what is taking place now as a summer cloud or a storm in a tea cup," Oreib Rentawi told the AP. In Egypt, a column in the Al-Gomhuria newspaper expressed doubt that Israel would face any repercussions for its actions. "The extremist ruling clique (in Israel) knows well that they are outside the range of being punished by sanctions, economic or political boycott or even a threat to freeze aid," wrote Sameer Ragab. Obama did get some vocal support from the Arab League. In Beirut, the group's secretary general, Amr Moussa, said Arabs should praise the US president. "The man has in fact said the right things and tried hard," Moussa said. Still, the mistrust has already hurt US policy. US allies Saudi Arabia and Gulf nations have rejected US pressure to make diplomatic gestures to Israel to encourage it in the peace process, citing its hard line on settlements. It could bleed over into other realms, such as US attempts to isolate Iran, which Washington and its allies accuse of seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Tehran denies the claims. Regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia is a central player in Washington's efforts to build a front against Iran. In recent months, the kingdom has taken a tougher, more vocal tone against Tehran, reflecting its own fears over a possible Iranian nuclear program but also over mainly Shia and non-Arab Iran's spreading influence in the Mideast and support for militant groups. But Saudi Arabia may grow more reluctant to play such a public role if resentment over the United States grows because of peace process failures. The latest tumult over Israel is not the first time Obama's overtures in the Arab world have fallen flat. Last month, Syrian President Bashar Assad rejected US calls to loosen his longtime alliance with Iran, even as Washington named the first US ambassador to Damascus since 2005 and sent top diplomats to meet with Assad. "Obama promised a lot of things, but

within this one and a half years there is nothing happening," she said. "Only talking." – Jamal Halaby in Amman, Jordan, Hadeel al-Shalchi and Maamoun Youssef in Cairo, Albert Aji in Damascus, Syria and Sinan Salaheddin in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Economic front:

Mideast PE firms eye financing sources

Reuters: March 19, 2010: Private equity firms in the Middle East are looking at development financial institutions (DFIs) as an alternative to elusive bank lending, executives said on Tuesday. "The change in mix of funding providers — more (reliant) on development financial institutions as opposed to Western commercial banks — is going to be the theme for private equity in 2010," said Ahmed El Houssieny, managing director at Cairo-based Citadel Capital, at a conference in Dubai. DFIs — such as micro financing companies and revolving loan funds — have been major conduits for funds for firms, industries and sectors, mainly in emerging economies. Citadel, which manages about \$8.3 billion in investments, said it expects to close a \$2.2 billion financing related to an Egyptian refinery in the second quarter, \$900 million of which will include funding from state-run Japan Bank for International Cooperation. Banks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were forced to cut lending in the wake of the financial crisis and exposure to troubled conglomerate Dubai World and Saudi groups, However, bank lending, particularly from foreign banks in the region was reviving, one executive said. "We are certainly seeing in the last six to eight weeks foreign banks getting to be very aggressive in terms of syndications, term facilities, etc," said Omar Lodhi, executive director at Dubai-based Abraaj Capital. DFIs are willing to provide more credit to private equity firms in the region, for investments in greenfield projects, distressed assets and turnaround investments in the frontier markets of the region, executives said. "You do have a number of institutions who are playing a critical role, particularly in markets which are at this inflection point between raising capital for investments locally or raising it internationally," said Jennifer Choi, director of research at Emerging Markets Private Equity Association. Private equity funds focused on the Middle East region raised \$1 billion in 2009, compared with \$3.4 billion in 2008, according to a statement from Private Equity International (PEI), a financial information group, which hosted the forum. The industry in the region still faces challenges including attracting institutional interest, the regulatory environment and exiting investments, executives said. "The MENA region is well down the interest spectrum for international investors. You have got Asia which is the golden child of international investors in the emerging markets," said Stephen Murphy, managing director for institutional fund raising at Citadel.

Egyptian property boosted by Europe bank bonuses

Reuters: March 19, 2010: The return of European bank bonuses will breathe life into the world's catatonic market for overseas residential investment in 2010, the developer behind Egypt's biggest building project told Reuters. Peter Riddoch, chief executive of Port Ghalib Resort Co., a unit of Kuwaiti construction conglomerate M.A.Kharafi Group, said bankers were among those reviving buy-to-let plans as job security improved, with Egypt flying high on their wish lists. "The market for second luxury homes overseas was lying still for a while but it is now moving forward quite nicely again," Riddoch said in an interview at the MIPIM property trade fair. After more than a year of job cuts and

salary freezes, many European and US banks dished out bonuses again in early 2010 in moves likely to boost global sales of holiday homes. With the traditional hotspots of Spain and Dubai still very much in the doldrums, Riddoch said savvy investors were now looking to Egypt, where tourism growth hit a five-year high of a 43 percent year-on-year in January and February. “China is showing 10 percent growth in GDP, India is at 6.8 percent, Europe and the US are negative but Egypt is showing 5.8 percent growth. It’s right up there with the big guns but people are only starting to realize that potential,” he said. While poor transparency and uncertain rental prospects in other global residential investment markets had inspired some foreign investors to look at Egypt, Riddoch said the market “could stand on its own two feet.” The opportunity to make money from property ownership in integrated resort communities like Port Ghalib was not lost on Egypt’s emerging middle class, many of whom had got in early, sold and recycled the proceeds into a new crop of investments. The fruits of its efforts to make foreign real estate investment more straightforward and transparent in recognition of the benefits to its economy. “Other than the Sinai which is 99-year leasehold, freehold foreign ownership has always been permissible. There are limits on the numbers of homes an overseas individual can own but companies can own as many as they want,” he said, explaining an uptick in interest for bulk-buying at Port Ghalib. The M.A. Kharafi Group is investing more than \$2 billion in the first 8 million square-meter phase of the overall 30 million square-meter project on Egypt’s Red Sea coast. Port Ghalib is offering gross rental yield guarantees of 5-7 percent on holiday homes for the first three years to sweeten discerning investors who expect their euro or pound to go much further today than it did three years ago. “If you ignore the flatness of the last 18 months, 10-15 percent (capital growth) is not unreasonable to expect on a per annum basis,” Riddoch said. “People want to invest in communities not just resorts. They want to know that even out of season, these investments still perform. The days of creating a bunch of villas and a swimming pool and drawing lots of Western cash are long gone,” he said.

Egypt: Stimulus pressure

DailyNewEgypt March 18, 2010: With the advent of the global financial crisis, most countries saw their construction activities grind to a halt as banks tightened lending. In this respect, Egypt is proving resilient; indeed, its cement producers are trying to keep pace with an energetic construction industry. As an anti-crisis measure, the government has aimed stimulus money at large infrastructure development projects, including water treatment plants, railways, highways and housing. Around LE 23 billion (€3.1 billion) has been issued since October 2008 to stimulate the economy, and the People’s Assembly is currently pushing through another LE 10 billion (€1.35 billion) in stimulus cash, which will be financed by the sale of land plots. This construction surge should help push the GDP growth rate above 5 percent in the 2009/10 fiscal year, after registering 4.7 percent in 2008/09. The sustained demand means Egypt’s limited construction supplies are trying to keep up. “Despite the slowdown in Egypt’s GDP following the global financial crisis, it has not translated into a slowdown in construction, with cement demand maintaining high growth levels throughout 2009,” Jaime Muguero Dominguez, president of Cemex, a local cement company, told OBG. According to the national Industrial Development Authority, cement demand increased 26 percent over the course of the year. As a global trend, most input costs for construction decreased during the crisis due to lack of demand.

However, Egypt saw a steady rise in the number of construction projects, so prices for rebar have stayed steady in most parts of the country, while increasing slightly in Alexandria and Matrouh, for example. In contrast, cement shot up to LE 680 (€90) per ton in April 2009, and the government swiftly responded by banning exports of the product for four months. Without the possibility of producers sending their product abroad, prices stabilized at around LE 500 (€7). “Contractors are expediting projects to capitalize on significantly lower overall construction costs, with this demand acting as the main driver for cement price increases,” said Dominguez. Earlier in February, the Trade Ministry shot down a planned price increase by two Egyptian cement firms, the Suez Group and Amreyah Cimpor Cement Company. The government has intervened on cement pricing before, including increasing export duties in 2007 and prosecuting 20 firms for price-fixing in 2008. But low prices do not necessarily solve the shortage caused by increased demand, and the government has pledged to increase domestic cement production capacity. The country is now producing 50m tons of cement annually. Bidding for eight new cement production licenses will begin in mid-2010, with each new factory able to contribute an extra 1.5 million tons per year. While some fear this will create a massive cement surplus once the construction push is over, there are signs that Egypt will be well stocked with projects for the foreseeable future. For one, Orascom, the country largest construction company, has teamed up with Morgan Stanley to focus on infrastructure development in the MENA region. Their 50-50 joint venture, unveiled in January, will spend “hundreds of millions” on projects ranging from wastewater treatment plants to power generators, according to Orascom CEO Nassef Sawiris. The Egyptian holding is already involved in the construction of two new fertilizer plants in Egypt with a \$200 million price tag in total. This new joint venture follows an upswing of private sector participation directed at eliminating the industrial bottleneck caused by lack of infrastructure. “From an operational standpoint, Egyptian industrialists face a major future challenge in securing additional power plant capacity and supply of electricity,” Dominguez told OBG. The World Bank has predicted that if Egypt permanently increases its infrastructure expenditure to 6 percent from its current 5 percent, then its annual GDP per capita growth rate would increase by 0.5 percent within a decade. As such, Egypt’s anti-crisis measure is serving two main purposes: creating jobs and stimulating the economy, while also putting into the place the infrastructure needed to leverage future growth. However, in this situation Egypt’s cement producers have not been able to fully capitalize on skyrocketing demand. *—This article was first published by Oxford Business Group on Feb. 17, 2010.*

ANALYSIS: Premature optimism for Egypt’s economy?

Daily News Egypt: March 17, 2010: Financial services group Credit Suisse voiced unequivocal support for Egypt as not only a strong choice for international investment, but as one of the best choices in the region, according to a recent report. The report cited Egypt’s healthy stock market, domestically-driven demand and government economic reforms among its many attractions. However, the turbulence witnessed by the EGX 30 this week — sliding by 3.84 percent Monday to post its largest loss for 2010 — raises several questions. Although not necessarily indicative of a sustained downward trend, the fall reinforces the insecurity of several of the factors upon which Egypt depends to see the economy return to its pre-crisis vigor. Regional tensions remain an issue. Orascom Telecom (OT), one of the primary weights dragging down the market Tuesday, has seen

losses of \$46.4 million following World Cup qualifying matches between Algeria and Egypt last November. In its recent results statement for fourth quarter 2009/2010, OT reported, "The recent riot events in Algeria following the football match had a negative impact on the operations." A tax dispute with the Algerian government and an ownership tug-of-war with France Telecom have also weakened OT's position. According to Arab Finance, CI Capital downgraded Telecom Egypt's rating from "buy" to "sell" with a 6 percent downside. Although Credit Suisse reported an annual 11.9 percent increase for the EGX 30, and highlighted its strength in comparison to GCC markets, such volatility from one of the stock index's primary companies is likely to spook gun-shy investors. Credit Suisse concurs with the government's projected real GDP growth of 5.5 percent for fiscal year 2009/2010 and expects 6 percent growth the following fiscal year, in comparison to the 4.1 percent global GDP increase expected. But regional competitors may mop up investors before Egypt has a chance to fully recover; Oman's economy is forecast to grow by 6 percent this year, as the Omani finance minister told Reuters in January. Still, the power of the Egyptian population will drive growth regardless; domestic consumption was responsible for 76.2 percent of GDP in 2008/2009. Credit Suisse looks for a 5 percent increase in real private consumption for fiscal year 2009/2010. GDP growth looks to be driven by domestic growth and infrastructure projects financed by government stimulus, as well as "a rebound in global trade, where Egypt benefits from Suez Canal revenues and exports" stated Credit Suisse. Yet Egypt's recovery also relies heavily on FDI levels returning to the heights attained prior to the crisis. The minister of investment still hopes to draw \$7.5 billion in 2009/2010, after scaling back from \$10 billion, and \$9.5 billion in 2010/2011. Finally, Credit Suisse cites the labor force as a potentially major boon. According to their report, "the availability of a large labor force, combined with a low GDP per capita (\$2,300 in fiscal year 2008/2009, below countries such as Turkey and China), makes Egypt attractive as a low-cost production destination (globally competitive) and essentially an attractive export hub — Egypt's location and trade agreements with the EU and North America are added advantages." Yet according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, hired by the Ministry of Investment to recommend reforms for improving Egypt's business climate, a three-day workshop revealed deep dissatisfaction with Egyptian workers. While the Business Climate Development Strategy assesses 12 areas, ranking national labor force alongside access-to-finance, government policies, and corruption, etc, analysis of the labor force touches on wider concerns related to education, social stability and an economy's future potential. As pointed out by OECD economist Ania Thiemann, "Economic growth is not just about firms, but also the human capital that underpins the economy."

OCI net rises, fertilizer outlook positive

Reuters: March 18, 2010: Egypt's biggest listed firm, Orascom Construction Industries (OCI), posted a 42 percent rise in quarterly profit after margins and prices improved, and said it saw fertilizer demand continuing to grow. The building and fertilizer industry giant posted fourth-quarter net profit of \$105.8 million, just below the \$111.3 million average forecast in a Reuters poll, but within a \$98 million to \$132 million range. "The results were slightly positive, operational-wise, but the bottom line was impacted by one-off losses, which is not a big deal. I wouldn't change my stance on this company," said EFG-

Hermes analyst Ahmed Shams. Net profit was dampened by a larger-than-expected foreign exchange loss of \$7.7 million after the euro's depreciation against the dollar impacted OCI's euro deposits, he added. Analysts see OCI posting higher profits in 2010, as global urea and ammonia prices continue to rise, increasing the portion of revenue contributed by the firm's relatively high-margin fertilizer operations. "We see better fertilizer prices compared to 2009, which will impact profitability of course," Pharos analyst George Beshara said. Higher construction spending in Egypt, Qatar and Abu Dhabi should help OCI win \$4 billion worth of new contracts in 2010, he added. Pharos expects OCI's net profit to jump by over one-fifth next year to \$550 million, and revenue to rise to \$4.6 billion. The firm's shares traded 3.3 percent higher by 1108 GMT, while the main index rose 0.6 percent. OCI's fertilizer group sold 1.358 million tons of urea at an average price of \$266 per ton and 384,000 tons of ammonia at an average price of \$251 per ton in 2009, OCI said in a statement accompanying the results. "We are optimistic that market conditions for urea and ammonia will continue to improve during 2010," the firm's chairman and chief executive, Nassef Sawiris, said in the statement. OCI said its construction wing was granted \$3.16 billion of new awards in 2009, about two thirds of which was infrastructure work. Consolidated backlog stood at \$6.65 billion at end-December, down 7.8 percent from the previous quarter. Fourth-quarter earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) jumped to \$225.4 million from \$147.3 million in 2008. Consolidated revenue in the quarter dropped 5 percent to \$966.6 million compared to a year earlier. In 2008, the firm posted fourth-quarter net profit from continued operations of \$74.5 million, which excluded gains from the sale of a 45-percent stake in Sokhna Port Development Company.

Social front

Mubarak names successor to late Al-Azhar cleric: report

AFP: March 19, 2010: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Friday appointed a new head of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's most prestigious institution, after the death of its top cleric last week, the official MENA agency reported. Mubarak, who is recovering from surgery in Germany, "has issued a presidential decree appointing Sheikh Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed Al-Tayeb to head Al-Azhar," MENA reported. Tayeb, the president of Al-Azhar University since 2003, succeeds Grand Imam Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, who died of a heart attack in Saudi Arabia on March 10. Al-Azhar institution — which groups a 10th century mosque, a university and several affiliated schools — is Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning. Its role is to propagate Islamic teachings and culture around the world. French-educated Tayeb also held the post of Grand Mufti, the country's most senior Islamic scholar, until September 2003. Since 1961, the grand imam of Al-Azhar has been appointed by presidential decree, opening up the post to criticism of being too close to the government. —AFP

Cairo hosts donor conference to rebuild Darfur

Agence France-Presse: March 19, 2010: International donors are to gather in Egypt's capital on Sunday with a \$2 billion target for the reconstruction of Darfur, Sudan's western region devastated by a seven-year war. The one-day conference has been organized by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which groups 57

members to form the world's largest Islamic assembly, and is to be co-chaired by host Egypt and Turkey. Around 25 non-OIC member states and 50 international organizations and NGOs have also been invited to take part. The \$2 billion which the conference aims to raise is to finance in cooperation with Khartoum a long list of development projects in agriculture, water supply, health and education. "The conference aims to send a clear message to the international community that development is a key factor in achieving peace and stability in Darfur," the host nation said in a statement. Aid to Darfur has so far concentrated on humanitarian and relief efforts. But organizers are trying to shift gear by working on a more long-term vision for Darfur through development and reconstruction projects. Funds raised can either be directly poured into projects or go through the OIC in coordination with the government of Sudan. The OIC is to form a follow-up committee tasked with overseeing the running of projects. The ministerial level conference also hopes to "provide an incentive to all Darfur movements to join the peace process" which has been taking place in Doha, the host said. Negotiations between the government of Sudan and Darfur rebel groups led Thursday to the signing of a framework peace accord between Khartoum and a small Darfur rebel group, the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM). Last month, an accord was inked by Khartoum and the Justice and Equality Movement, in a move hailed by the international community as a major step toward bringing peace to Darfur. But the talks have since run into difficulty. A key rebel group, the Sudan Liberation Army faction of Abdelwahid Nur, has so far rejected negotiations with Khartoum and earlier this month fought fierce clashes with the army in the fertile Jebel Marra plateau in the heart of Darfur. The Cairo conference comes three weeks before Sudan holds its first multi-party elections since 1986. Egypt and a number of OIC countries are strong allies of Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. The OIC has condemned the arrest warrant against Beshir, saying it undermined peace efforts in Darfur and stability in Sudan. Through the conference, Cairo will also raise its regional profile, after Qatar's leading role in negotiations between Khartoum and Darfur rebels despite Egypt's proximity to Sudan. Since ethnic minority rebels first rose up against the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum in 2003, the Darfur conflict has claimed about 300,000 lives and left 2.7 million people homeless, according to UN figures. Khartoum puts the death toll at 10,000.

Opposition Party criticizes Egyptian newspaper

Egypt News Tuesday, 16 March 2010 President of Egypt's opposition party al-Wafd Mahmoud Abaza criticized daily paper *almasry alyoum* for printing details of an alleged deal between the party and the Egyptian ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Abaza described the paper as a "fascist newspaper", said the paper. According to the alleged agreement, Al-Wafd will be given 32 seats in parliament in return for withdrawing its support for Mohamed ElBaradei--a would-be candidate in next year's presidential elections--and for opposing the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) opposition group. At a press conference on Monday, Abaza accused the paper of deliberately trying to tarnish his party's reputation and credibility. "They know they are lying," he said, adding that he planned to sue the newspaper. Leading MB member Gamal Heshmat expressed little surprise over the allegation, saying that Al-Wafd was known for striking political deals with the ruling regime. "Mahmoud el-Shazli of Al-Wafd's executive board admitted to

this in 2003," said Heshmat. "That's why he lost in parliamentary elections." NDP Secretary-General Safwat el-Sherif, for his part, denied that any deals had been made with opposition parties. "The only deal we make is with the Egyptian people--namely, to do our best to safeguard their interests," he said.

Islam Online sit-in continues after mass resignation

Daily News Egypt: March 17, 2010: Employees of the Islam Online (IOL) website continued their sit-in for the third day running at their Sixth of October offices, demanding their settlement packages after the majority of them submitted their resignation. A source from IOL who spoke on condition of anonymity said, "Qatar has reneged on the deal for the severance packages. A lawyer is currently present to discuss legal rights." IOL employees started a strike on Monday after warnings of mass layoffs and employee investigations by the funder of the site, Qatar's Al-Balagh Foundation. It was also announced that their contracts, which expire at the end of March, would not be renewed. A total of 300 employees submitted their resignations Tuesday after being told it was the only way to ensure they receive severance packages. At the heart of these events is a struggle over IOL's editorial content between a new board of directors in Qatar and the website editors in Egypt. South African Bibi-Aisha Wadvalla, head of IOL Radio and one of the few non-Egyptians working there, told Daily News Egypt that the root of the current crisis began in January, when managing editors were asked to urgently submit their editorial agendas because the board wanted to chart the website's editorial agenda for the next few years. "They issued an agenda of their own, and we were told our agendas should be in accordance," she said, "This was the first [time] many people had heard of the new board. Already, people saw that as a sign of trouble. The board had never before interfered in editorial decisions." A meeting was called where they were informed that a new board had been appointed and the general manager along with the managers of the English and Arabic sections were to go to Qatar for talks. General Manager Tawfiq Ghanem appointed Ashraf Sabti to stand in for him while he was in Qatar. Wadvalla said, "Qatar sent an email, worded very rudely, rebuking the General Manager, Tawfiq Ghanem, for taking the decision to appoint someone to stand in for him. They said only they exercise the right." A petition signed by 250 of the IOL Egypt employees was sent to the chairman of the board and IOL founder, the Egyptian cleric Yousef El-Qaradawi, denouncing the manner in which Qatar had communicated with them. Ghanem then resigned. The board appointed a Qatari, Atef Abdel Moghny in his place, who transferred the site to a smaller, slower server as a cost-cutting measure and took the password for the main server, according to Wadvalla. Rumors quickly abounded but assurances were given that all was fine — until Monday, when employees began their sit-in to request answers from the new board. "When national security police were called in by Qatar, a full out strike ensued," Wadvalla said, "It turned into a full strike after a committee from Qatar came and said all 250 people who had signed the petition protesting against the rude tone of the email [sent] to the general manager, would be investigated. "In the afternoon, Qatar blocked Egypt's access to the server. By the end of the working day, it was said the contract between Al-Balagh, the holding company owned by the Qatari board, would not renew the contract it had with Media International," she added. This meant that the employees would be terminated, so they submitted their resignations in order to receive severance packages. They are currently

calling for a six months salary plus one month for every year of employment. The IOL staff is also calling for a full one-year's salary for those earning less than LE 1,000 a month. "Nobody will leave until each employee is afforded their full rights," Wadvalla said, "Thus the sit-in continues." IOL was founded by El-Qaradawi in 1997 and became a popular Islamic resource on the internet that fielded questions on religiously taboo topics such as sexuality. It developed into a more comprehensive website, offering news, commentaries and analysis. In a pioneering move, the IOL protest was streamed live online and IOL staff continuously updated news of the sit-in on sites such as Twitter.

Egypt listed as 'enemy of the internet'

Daily News Egypt: March 14, 2010: Egypt was listed as an "enemy of the internet" by Reporters Without Borders as a US State Department 2009 report on human rights highlighted Egypt's ill-treatment of bloggers and internet activists in 2009. The internet has become a "battlefield for supporters and opponents of fundamental human rights," the US State Department report said. "During the year, police harassed, detained, and allegedly abused certain bloggers and internet activists [in Egypt]," it added. "2009 was a year in which people gained greater access than ever before to more information about human rights through the internet, cell phones, and other forms of connective technologies," the report said, "and yet, it was the year in which governments spent the most time, money and attention finding regulatory and technical means to curtail [...] the flow of critical information." While the Egyptian government does not actively censor the internet: according to a 2009 report by the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), it continues to arrest, harass and prosecute Egyptian bloggers — a practice condemned by the US State Department report. Bloggers' detention and harassment is done under the Emergency Law, which authorizes incommunicado detention for prolonged periods under suspicions of threatening national security. Egypt was listed as one of the 10 worst countries to be a blogger in 2009 by the Committee to Protect Journalists. Though the Egyptian government has actively promoted the use of the internet through low-cost access, only 15.9 percent of the Egyptian population uses the internet, and it is systematically monitored by the Egyptian government. The US report identified at least seven pro-democracy bloggers, including Alaa Malek Mostafa, Asma Ali, Karim Al-Shaer, and Mohammad Sharkawy — who was also tortured while in detention. Political blogs posed a problem for 15 activists who included Philip Rizk, a graduate student at the American University of Cairo. All 15 activists were held during a six-mile march in Qaliubiya governorate, as they aimed to draw attention to the humanitarian situation in Gaza under the Israeli embargo, calling for President Mubarak to end the blockade. Iran, another state listed as an "enemy of the internet," witnessed a large drop in bandwidth during the June election, the US report said, which experts deem a preventive measure from the government to deter online activist protests. China, also on the list, was accused of restricting information and blocking access to foreign and domestic websites, and punishing online political critics. To these allegations, China defends its practices by accusing the US of "information imperialism." In North Korea, "there were no independent media, and internet access was limited to high-ranking officials and other elites," the report added. Russia, which Reporters Without Borders deem "under surveillance," has been observed to have arrested politically active bloggers, and in Turkey, several sites, including the video sharing service YouTube have been

blocked. While Reporters Without Borders' director Clothilde Le Coz accused US technology companies such as Cisco Systems Inc. for aiding regimes by selling products which aid censorship, Cisco iterated in a statement on Thursday that "the company does not provide any government with any special capabilities, and the products sold in China, are also sold elsewhere."

Over 300 Islam Online employees resign

Daily News Egypt: March 16, 2010: The majority of Islam Online (IOL) Egypt's 330 staff submitted their resignation following a two-day sit-in spurred by warnings of mass lay-offs and employee investigations by the website's Qatari owner. The sit-in, at IOL's Egypt headquarters in Sixth of October City, continued for the second day Tuesday after staff at the Cairo office were informed Monday that the holding company Al-Balagh Foundation would not renew their contracts when they expire at the end of March. They were given the option of resigning to receive their benefits packages. It is believed a recent board change at Al-Balagh Foundation, the Qatari NGO behind IOL, is what led to the current stand-off. Two hundred and fifty members had sent a statement to IOL founder and chairman of Al-Balagh Foundation Sheikh Yousef El-Qaradawi complaining about the tactics of the new board in Qatar. Al-Balagh sent a delegation of lawyers to the Egypt office to take over affairs in the branch and conduct an investigation into the 250 employees who signed the statement. Lawyers and upper management of the Egypt IOL office remained locked in talks behind closed doors for most of Tuesday reportedly to discuss the details of the severance packages. Daily News Egypt reporters couldn't meet members of Al-Balagh delegation at the IOL Egypt premises. Calls to Al-Balagh's offices in Qatar went unanswered by press time. An editor at IOL, who asked to remain anonymous citing a request by El-Qaradawi not to speak to the media, told Daily News Egypt, "What management had communicated to the editorial team was that the editorial content would not be interfered with in any way, but there was a feeling that there was a desire [to have IOL] take on a more conservative stance." "And they wanted to shut down certain sections of the site, especially the news, so people were concerned that they would have more editorial control," the editor added. As for El-Qaradawi's position, the editor said, "It was communicated to us that Sheikh El-Qaradawi wanted us to hold off talking to the media until everything was finalized because it is fueling rumors and speculation. What we have been told is that he is not happy and he might resign as well." El-Qaradawi did not have much say over the current impasse because "he's become a more symbolic figure and does not have much managerial control." IOL was founded by El-Qaradawi in 1997 and became a popular Islamic resource on the internet that fielded questions on religiously risqué topics such as sexuality that were not discussed as openly before. It developed into a wholesome website, offering news, commentaries and analysis. In a pioneering move, the IOL protest was streamed live online and IOL staff continuously updated news of the sit-in on sites such as Twitter.

Islam Online dispute continues after calls for general meeting

Daily News Egypt: March 18, 2010: The dispute between the Egyptian office of Islam Online (IOL) and the board of its funding foundation in Qatar continued Thursday even after two members of the board were suspended and a general meeting was called for to resolve the issue. Though it seemed that it was the end of the line for the 330 employees

of IOL in Egypt, matters took a turn Wednesday night when the board of the Qatari Al Balagh Foundation, headed by Sheikh Yousef El-Qaradawi, voted to suspend the membership of two members who were allegedly behind the plans to relocate the office to Qatar. Ibrahim Al-Ansari and Ali El-Emady were the two members suspended, but IOL employees stated that both men had refused to acquiesce to the board's demands, and by press time had announced that they were to hold a press conference. The suspension of the two board members had been met by a positive response from the IOL Egypt employees, who blamed the two newly appointed board members for the impasse that led to resignation of 300 of them and the possible closure of the office in Sixth of October City. "Everyone is taking it as good news," IOL Radio Editor Bibi-Aisha Wadvalla told Daily News Egypt, "and are now more positive about the situation." IOL staff continued their strike at the premises as it was announced that a general meeting would be held within the next two weeks. Additionally, IOL employees still do not have access to their server and claim that a lot of content has been removed from the website. IOL employees had walked out Monday after warnings of mass lay-offs and employee investigations by the funder of the site Al Balagh Foundation. It was also announced that the company contract that was to expire at the end of March would not be renewed. Over 300 employees submitted their resignations Tuesday after having been told this was the only way to ensure a severance package would be given. On Wednesday employees continued their strike because the terms of the severance packages had not been defined. At the heart of events with IOL in Egypt is a struggle over the editorial content of the website between the new board members in Qatar and the website editors in Egypt. Two hundred and fifty employees had signed and sent a petition to El-Qaradawi bemoaning what they perceived as board interference in the editorial content of the site, which had grown from a purely theological website to a more comprehensive one that included news and commentaries. Strikers took a new tack by uploading a live feed of the protest online and continuously updating events on sites such as Twitter.

Will campaign efforts register with voters?

Daily News Egypt: March 19, 2010: It's the question on everybody's mind; who will you vote for? Or better yet, will you vote at all? With the 2011 presidential elections on the horizon, campaigns are abound to encourage Egyptians to issue voting cards on social networking websites as well as through efforts by civil societies and some political parties. The deadline for registering to vote was even extended this year from its original Jan. 31 date. Last month, an administrative court verdict allowed voters' registration throughout the year. The court also ordered LE 3,000 in compensation to any citizen denied the issuance of a voting card. But the question remains whether it was enough to push citizens to make their votes count. According to statistics by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), around 40 million Egyptians are registered to vote. Mohamed Helmy is one of the creators of the Facebook group titled "Go Issue a Voting Card," aimed at raising awareness about the issue. "After [former IAEA chief] Mohamed ElBaradei said that he may run for president if the constitution was amended, I thought that most Egyptians from different backgrounds do not have a voting card," said Helmy. [people] don't even know what a voting card is, how, when and where to issue one, I collected the data [and posted it on the group page]," he added. Other campaigners explained that Egypt has been going through a stagnant phase for a

long time and that it was time for change. Online campaigns are aimed at reaching as many people as possible in a short period of time. "If I made a group with 2,500 members and others made other groups...we can gather a large number of people," Kyrillous George, also from "Go Issue a Voting Card," said. "Facebook offers a new platform where you can discuss [the latest issues]," explained Kyrillous. "If you want people to talk, give them an area where they can talk," he said, adding that the social networking website helped boost online activism. "My dream in the next elections is to see the percentage of participation over 85 percent," said Kyrillous. Rowaida Magdy launched an online campaign titled "The voting card is now all year round," also aimed at informing people about the issue. She explained that it is an individual's right to vote despite his or her political background. "People totally dismissed the idea [of issuing a voting card] thinking it's useless or a long procedure or it might get them into trouble," she said. "I thought I should do my part and spread the word and be positive and in the end, people make the change, to the worse or better... it's in their hands," she concluded. The most prominent campaign operates under the title of "Souty Matlaby" or "My Call, My Voice," initiated by activists including George Ishaq, former coordinator of the Kefaya movement. The campaign has four main objectives, as stated on their website www.soutymatlaby.com, including creating electoral schedules according to national IDs, facilitating electronic voting, amending articles in the constitution pertaining to political rights and the international monitoring of elections. Ishaq said they launched the campaign in an attempt to motivate people and avoid any manipulation with voters' cards. "People have been facing problems issuing voting cards ... which several times led them to lose their temper and leaving," said Ishaq. "If we get 40 percent of the people's votes, than this is an achievement in itself," he said. **Registered voters** Daily News Egypt polled 90 people, 64 percent of which said they do not have a voting card, while 26 percent said they are planning on issuing one. Respondents who hold voting cards said they are registered to allow them to positively participate in building Egypt's future, changing the country for the better and have a voice in the political life. They explained that it is the citizen's responsibility to vote for the next president emphasizing that it's the only way Egypt can develop. "I issued my voting card to contribute to making a better future for my country, and because I'm being positive," Mohamed Nashaat, a 22-year-old student, said. In Alexandria, Mina Wagdy, 23, said he is planning on voting because he wants to select the best candidate to be the president in the upcoming elections. Most respondents said they are registered because they want to play a positive role in their country and because they wish to exercise their rights in voting. They agreed that they are "trying to make a difference and hoping for change." "My voice means my existence in Egypt and I can't imagine not existing," said a 23-year-old respondent from Mahalla. 21-year-old Islam Abdel Hamid from Cairo said he will vote to "actively contribute in achieving democracy in my country." Ahmed Abbas, a 23-year-old medical student, thinks of it as his "duty."**Apathetic voters** Apathy and skepticism looms over others who did not register to vote. Almost half of the respondents polled by Daily News Egypt who do not have a voting card believe the elections are going to be forged. Some respondents said they did not believe in the integrity of elections, casting doubt on democracy under the current regime. The other half said they simply did not have the time to issue one, while a few other respondents said they did not know when the deadline to register is. "I tried to go to the police station and the officer in charge was not there so I had no other

time to go,” Eman Helal, a 32-year-old accountant, said. Others are discouraged, saying going through the process can be a hassle. An official at the Nozha Police station first told this Daily News Egypt reporter that the deadline for voting cards had passed. Then the official asked for a birth certificate, but upon insistence, eventually handed over the registration form. Mahmoud Yousry, a 24-year-old student said, “Bureaucracy is what prevents me.” Another respondent claimed that the police station told him he can’t register until May. “Some applications were refused, asking applicants to submit a lot of documents; some argue the need for the birth certificate when they already have their national ID card,” he said. **Calling for free and fair elections** While some activists are eager to make their votes count, they still cast doubt on the integrity of the elections. This drove the “Egyptians for Fair and Free Elections” movement to call for international monitoring of the elections, sending requests to the Carter Center, the African Union and the European Union. Last month, the movement held a seminar at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), where its official spokesperson George Ishaq highlighted the need for international monitoring. “The European Union sent a request to the Egyptian authorities in order to allow foreign monitoring bodies next elections,” he said. However, Michael Ryan, first counselor Political Affairs, Delegation of the European Commission in Egypt, said that while the EU offered to help in the upcoming elections for example by updating the voters list and helping in civil awareness, it “cannot monitor any elections at which we were not invited.” So far, he continued, the EU’s proposal hasn’t been rejected. “We are still engaged in the discussion over the table with the Egyptian government.” Ishaq maintained that “the international monitoring of elections doesn’t violate a state’s sovereignty.” “In the MENA region the EU has already monitored [elections in] Sudan, Palestine and Lebanon which was a very successful experience,” Ryan said. Last October, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) also announced the formation of a human rights coalition comprised of 148 rights groups and organizations to monitor elections in Egypt to ensure its integrity.

Court supports women judges at final Egypt hold-out

March 15 (Reuters) - A top Egyptian court has ruled that women should be allowed to serve on the State Council, a court that tries cases involving the government and which has so far resisted including female judges. Before a woman is actually appointed, however, she must be approved by the State Council's administrative body, which is unlikely to go against its conservative rank and file. "The problem is not coming from the State Council judges in general, but from some extremist members in the State Council's general assembly," said activist and lawyer Negad el-Borai, who has followed the issue closely. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif asked the Supreme Constitutional Court to explain the word "Egyptian" in the regulations for becoming a judge on the council. The word is in the masculine in Arabic but can also be applied generically to both genders. Details of Sunday's Supreme Constitutional Court's verdict, which is considered a victory for women's rights in this conservative and male-dominated nation, were released on Monday. In February and March, the State Council's general assembly voted twice against allowing women to become judges, while activists protested in front of the council's downtown Cairo headquarters in favour. **EARLIER ATTEMPTS** During earlier attempts in 2009 to install women, the general assembly said the working environment and toilets at its headquarters would be inappropriate. President Hosni Mubarak

appointed Tahany el-Gibali, Egypt's first woman judge, to the Constitutional Court in 2003. The appointment stirred a debate in Egypt, and conservative judges campaigned to stop what they regarded as an exception from becoming a trend. Muslim and Arab countries viewed by many Egyptians as socially and economically less developed have appointed female judges before Egypt. Ahmed Mekky, deputy head of the Court of Cassation, said many obstacles prevented women from working as judges. "Beside the bad work conditions that the assembly pointed out, judges need to wear a certain form of dress. What if a female judge came to court dressed in flowery patterned cloth or decided to wear the full face veil?" Mekky said. Mekky added that judges were required to travel and serve in different towns and not serve in areas where they lived to insure their maximum objectivity and fairness. "How can a woman with a six-month-old child do that?" he asked. "There are rules that cannot be applied to women because if applied, they would place the woman's family and children in danger," he added.

Police arrests Muslim Brotherhood students in anti-Israel protests

AFP: March 16, 2010: Egyptian police arrested on Monday 15 students affiliated with the banned Muslim Brotherhood during a protest at Cairo University against Israeli settlements, a security official said. Hundreds of students staged protests in several universities across Egypt over Israeli plans to build new homes for Jewish settlers in occupied East Jerusalem and include two West Bank Muslim shrines on a list of Israeli heritage sites. Arrests of demonstrators were only reported at Cairo University, where students clashed with security forces, the official said. The Brotherhood meanwhile said on its website that police also arrested 18 of its members in dawn raids on Monday in Alexandria, following what it said were two days of pro-Palestinian demonstrations. On Friday police arrested 50 Brotherhood protesters who took part in anti-Israeli demonstrations. The Muslim Brotherhood is banned but tolerated in Egypt where it has controlled a fifth of seats in parliament since it fielded candidates as independents in the 2005 polls. The group has accused the authorities of cracking down on its members ahead of upper house elections in April and lower house elections in October. In February deputy leader Mahmoud Ezzat was among 16 Brotherhood members arrested by the police. –AFP

Iraq

Political front:

Elections

Iraqi PM Leads Vote In Basra

March 14, 2010(Reuters) -- A list led by Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had a wide lead in early results from the southern oil hub of Basra a week after Iraq's parliamentary election, the country's electoral commission said on March 14. Basra will be at the heart of huge oilfield development projects by foreign firms. Maliki's State of Law coalition had 219,657 votes compared to 121,497 for a fellow Shi'ite list, the Iraqi National Alliance, which has close ties to Iran. Iraqiya, a secular, cross-sectarian alliance led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, had 36,093 votes. The totals represented 63 percent of the vote in Basra province.

Maliki Leads Partial Vote Count In Baghdad

March 13, 2010 The partial vote count for Baghdad shows Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in the lead from last weekend's parliamentary elections. Iraqi election officials said that the vote tally for the capital so far shows Maliki's State of Law alliance in first place, followed by the Shi'ite religious parties' Iraqi National Alliance in second, and the secular Al-Iraqiyah bloc of former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi in third. Iraqi state television reported that only 18 percent of the vote has been counted in Baghdad so far. Final results from the March 7 polls may take weeks more.

Maliki Coalition Ahead In Early Iraqi Vote Count

Iraq's election commission has published the first preliminary results from the March 7 parliamentary elections, and results from five provinces were in line with expectations. But they did not include Baghdad and other hard-to-predict areas that could play a key role in Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's bid to remain in power. The early results show al-Maliki's State of Law coalition ahead in the largely Shi'ite south, followed by the Iraq National Alliance. Maliki's coalition brings together his Al-Dawah party and Shi'ite Kurds, plus a sprinkling of Sunni tribal leaders, some Christians and independents. The Iraqi National Alliance is led by two Shi'ite religious parties, namely the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the grouping around radical Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr. The National Alliance is pro-Iranian. Results showed the secularist party Al-Iraqiyah, which is led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi, making a good showing among Iraq's Sunni minority. Late on March 11 Iraqiya complained that serious violations had taken place, including that some of its votes had been removed from boxes, thrown in the garbage and replaced by other ballots. "Insistence in manipulating these elections forces us to question whether the possibility of fraudulent results would make the final results worthless," the party said. "We will not stand by with our arms crossed." Results from across Iraq's 18 provinces were delayed again and Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) said it would release remaining early results as they become available. Final results may take weeks. The vote counts made public so far represented only a small fraction of about 12 million votes cast and are considered too narrow a sample to indicate the likely outcome of the national elections. The early figures do appear to confirm, however, that no one party or grouping will have the numbers to form a government on its own. Even before the figures were released, reports from Baghdad said that the leaders or representatives of the various factions were meeting to sound out possibilities for alliance-building. Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi has called in an Internet statement for "extensive and sincere efforts by all political blocs to form a real national unity government." He said the next government must deliver security, services and better relations with neighboring countries. The March 7 vote was only the country's second parliamentary election since the adoption of a new constitution after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime seven years ago, following the U.S.-led invasion. The top United Nations envoy in Iraq, special representative Ad Melkert, has praised the conduct of the election. In remarks on March 10 at the election commission, Melkert called the counting of votes "honest" and said the world has been "impressed" by the professional way the vote took place. But some of the contesting parties nevertheless are suspicious. A spokeswoman for Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah bloc, Maysun Damaluji, has been quoted by Reuters as saying her party fears the count is not being conducted in a "proper fashion." She did not explain how, and she stopped short of alleging fraud, but said that the results

could be "modified" by the improper counting methods. The same agency quoted Adnan al-Janabi, a senior Al-Iraqiyah member, as telling reporters that "We have recorded dozens of violations and there is interference from some officials." The Iraqi National Alliance likewise complained of what it called "signs of intentions to change the election results." It did not specify these signs. Both parties urged the electoral commission to put the tally sheets of each province on the commission's website so that candidates and parties can count their votes manually. Complete provisional results are expected to be announced by next week, and the final official results by the end of March. Individuals or parties will be able to lodge appeals before the final results are announced. A successful, valid election has been viewed as an essential building block for Iraq's further development as a unified democratic state. Time is short for a new government to settle-in and shoulder the responsibility for domestic security through Iraq's own security forces. The United States plans to withdraw all its combat troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. compiled from agency reports

Iraq Vote Count Shows Maliki, Allawi Neck And Neck

March 17, 2010 (RFE/RL) -- With nearly 80 percent of the votes counted from Iraq's March 7 parliamentary elections, the main winners appear to be Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and challenger Iyad Allawi. But the two front-runners are neck and neck. The vote count so far shows Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah coalition narrowly ahead of Maliki's State of Law alliance by less than 9,000 votes. The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of Shi'ite religious groups, looks set to come in third, followed by the Kurdistan Alliance, composed of the two main factions in the autonomous Kurdish region. With 20 percent of the vote remaining to be counted, the balance between the two front-runners still could easily tip either way. **Coalition Talk** But what appears almost certain is that neither will be able to amass enough seats in parliament to rule alone. Already in Baghdad the talk is all about coalition building, and which party will partner with others. One senior candidate with the Al-Iraqiyah list, Intisar Allawi, a relative of Allawi, said on March 16 that the group held "very good and positive talks" with the Iraqi National Alliance and with the Kurdistan Alliance. At the same time, Prime Minister Maliki has invited all parties in Iraq to join negotiations with his State of Law alliance. With tensions high, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is cautioning that final vote tallies won't be known for some time yet. "We need another few days to announce the final results of the elections. We will hold a news conference to announce the results, following a meeting of IHEC's board of commissioners to ratify the final results," an IHEC official said on March 16. Complicating the announcement of final results are the charges of vote fraud lodged by many parties, including both front-runners. However, UN officials advising the IHEC have said they see no evidence of vote fraud widespread enough to undermine the outcome. **Redrawing Political Map** It is already clear that the balance of power in the new Iraqi parliament will be very different from what it is today. The parliament has been dominated over the past four years by an alliance of Shi'ite religious parties. Those parties swept the first Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2005, when Sunni Arabs largely boycotted the polls. Now, the Sunnis have come back to the ballot box, helping propel Allawi's secular bloc to prominence. By contrast, the Shi'ite religious parties have lost ground to both Allawi and Maliki, who also ran on a secular and nationalist message. The only group among the previously dominant Shi'ite religious parties that appears to have gained ground with this month's election is that of radical

cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr has always been a maverick in Iraqi politics -- at times a violent one. His group demands an immediate U.S. troop withdrawal and fought U.S. forces in 2004. It also was blamed for some of the country's worst sectarian violence before it was suppressed by the Iraqi military in 2008. In the north, the partial vote tally for the flashpoint province of Kirkuk shows little sign tensions there will be eased by the election results. Allawi's nationalist list holds only a slim lead there over its main challenger, the Kurdistan Alliance. The oil-rich province is claimed by three different Iraqi ethnic groups: Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans. **U.S. Withdrawal 'On Schedule'** U.S. officials are counting on the latest parliamentary elections to help smooth the way for Washington's planned troop withdrawal. The United States hopes by the end of August to halve the number of its troops in Iraq to 50,000. Those remaining are to engage only in noncombat operations, such as training. U.S. commanders have called the largely peaceful voting on March 7 a sign the country could be on the road to stability. U.S. General David Petraeus told a U.S. Senate panel on March 16 he planned to stick to the withdrawal timetable, which envisages removing all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. But he also noted that the situation in Iraq remained fragile. He said the U.S. military was still reviewing its plans for how best to manage its drawdown.

Iran Praises Iraq Election As Shi'ite Ally Leads

March 16, 2010 (Reuters) -- Iran has congratulated Iraqis over an election that is likely to keep a bloc led by its Shi'ite ally, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in power after a campaign in which Tehran's influence was a divisive issue. Maliki's main challenger, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who headed a secular list mixing Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs, made a high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia during the campaign to improve ties with Iran's biggest Sunni rival in the Persian Gulf region. "All international supervision has confirmed the soundness of the Iraqi elections. This is a success and we congratulate Iraqis," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a weekly press briefing on English-language state television. "We hope we'll be able to see the formation of the new government as soon as possible...the whole region will benefit from security in Iraq." Early results from the March 7 parliamentary vote show Maliki's State of Law bloc ahead in seven of 18 provinces, while strong Sunni Arab support has propelled Allawi's secularist Al-Iraqiyah list into second. A member of Iraq's Shi'ite Arab majority, Maliki has maintained close ties with non-Arab Shi'ite power Iran, Iraq's neighbor, which is locked in dispute with the United States over its nuclear energy program and influence in Arab countries. Analysts say leading Sunni Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be more comfortable with a government led by Allawi. Politicians have criticized the delay in publishing the election results. Allawi's list has put forward a long list of complaints about alleged fraud, including ballots found in garbage and more than 200,000 soldiers who were unable to vote because their names did not appear on official rosters. Maliki, who came to power in 2005, was unpopular in Arab capitals when sectarian fighting worsened in 2006, confirming the marginalization of Sunni Arabs who dominated Iraq under former leader Saddam Hussein. Sunnis see Maliki as a Shi'ite leader beholden to Tehran. The United States, which toppled Hussein in 2003, still has troops in Iraq who are preparing to withdraw before 2012 -- a process that could be key to U.S. President Barack Obama's political fortunes.

Iraq's Kurds Lose Political Dominance In Kirkuk

March 19, 2010 Before the March 7 parliamentary elections in Iraq, there was no question of who dominated politics in mixed-population Kirkuk -- it was the two main political factions in the neighboring Kurdish autonomous region. But with the vote count from Kirkuk city and its surrounding Tamin Province about 80 percent complete, it is clear that the political landscape is dramatically changing. The partial vote count shows the secular Al-Iraqiyah coalition and the Kurdistan Alliance in a virtual tie, with the balance between them shifting by only wafer-thin differences as the vote tally rises. If the current balance holds, it means that the divided province's Turkoman and Arab populations will have a much louder political voice than before. That in turn could complicate Kurdish hopes of one day incorporating oil-rich Kirkuk into their autonomous region. Turkoman politicians in Kirkuk make no secret of the fact that they competed in the parliamentary contest precisely with that goal in mind. **United Against Kurdish Ambitions** Hicran Kazanci head of the foreign relations department of the Iraqi Turkoman Front, tells RFE/RL's Turkmen Service that Turkoman candidates enlisted in a variety of coalitions for the March 7 race. But he says they all agree on one thing. "Despite the fact the Turkomans went into the election with different coalitions, on major and essential subjects they are united," Kazanci says. "For example, about the future status of Kirkuk, all of them are united in opposition toward annexing Kirkuk into any federation. And they are united in making Turkoman one of Iraq's official languages." koman and Arab politicians made up the vast bulk of Al-Iraqiyah's candidates in the local race, coming for the first time under a single political umbrella in the divided province. That is in sharp contrast to much of Kirkuk's recent history, where the three main population groups -- Kurdish, Turkoman, and Arab -- have all competed against each other. In the years immediately following the United States' toppling of Saddam Hussein, both Turkomans and Arabs boycotted attempts to form a provincial government. They expressed anger over what they said were Kurdish efforts to appropriate the province de facto after moving Kurdish peshmerga fighters into the area to support the U.S. invasion. The Turkomans and Arabs only agreed to take part in the running of the province after a power-sharing deal in 2008. Under that deal, the provincial governor is a Kurd while his two deputies are an Arab and a Turkoman. But Kirkuk's provincial parliament is still disputed after Arabs and Turkomans largely stayed away from the first election in 2005, handing the Kurds a majority. The Iraqi government excluded Tamin Province from the January 2009 provincial elections due to fears of sparking sectarian unrest. Given this background, the fact that this month's elections for deputies to the national parliament went peacefully in Tamin Province is a major surprise. To ensure security, the Iraqi police fielded 56 mobile patrols in Kirkuk city on election day, while Kurdish peshmerga also spread out less obtrusively across the provincial capital. Simira Balay, a correspondent for RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq, says the Kurdish coalition was caught unawares by the election results, after it "had expected to dominate the election, but it seems the Kurdish vote split among a number of Kurdish parties, including Goran." She says Kurdish bloc "now is neck and neck with the Iraqiyah list, which got most of the Turkoman and Arab vote." The Kurdish coalition comprises the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Goran, a recently created Kurdish opposition party, scored well in recent elections by running on an anticorruption platform. **Resolving Kirkuk Issue** In the aftermath of the elections, Kurdish political leaders -- like their Turkoman counterparts -- are stressing unity in their position over Kirkuk. The Kurds see

the city as the natural and historic capital of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. And they insist upon holding a referendum in the province to determine its future status. "The issue of Kirkuk is [already] in the Iraqi political arena to be solved in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution," says Rizgar Ali, the Kurdish head of Kirkuk's provincial council. Major steps under Article 140 include resolving property disputes created by Hussein's policy of "Arabizing" Kirkuk, the holding of a census and conducting a referendum to decide the province's future status. To date, progress on all these steps has been painfully slow. Most property disputes remain unresolved and unrest in northern Iraq has prevented a census. The referendum, originally planned for no later than the end of 2007, has slipped accordingly. That limbo is unacceptable to the Kurds, who are sure to use their full representation in the Baghdad parliament, including deputies from the Kurdish region, to continue to press for swift implementation of Article 140. But it is likely that both the Turkomans and Arabs will use their new voice in the federal legislature to try to subject Article 140 to further negotiation. According to Rakan Said, the Arab deputy governor of Kirkuk, the election results "laid the ground for dialogue." He adds that now there are "two parties to the issue of Kirkuk: one is Al-Iraqiyah and the other is the Kurdish coalition. So the platform [for dialogue] has become clear and without interference." **New Political Landscape** Al-Iraqiyah, headed by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, ran on a nonsectarian, nationalist platform. Its success on the national level as a joint front-runner with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition has appeared to realign Iraqi politics by relegating sectarian- and ethnic-based parties to the background. With some 80 percent of the vote counted nationwide, the Shi'ite religious parties' Iraqi National Alliance are in third place and the Kurdistan Alliance in fourth. Still, Iraqi parliamentary politics is all about making coalitions and in the past the Kurds have proved adept at playing the role of kingmakers. Whether the Kurdish parties can continue to do so now, or are relegated to a less prominent role, will directly affect Kirkuk's eventual status. The Kurds want it to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan. And the newly empowered Kirkuk Turkoman-Arab bloc is just as determined to play the spoiler. Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans all claim the province around Kirkuk based on a long historical presence in the area. The Turkic-speaking Turkomans, who claim to be the second-largest group in northern Iraq after the Kurds, trace their presence to the time of the Seljuk Empire, when migrating Turkic tribes conquered a vast expanse of territory stretching from modern Iran to Turkey.

Is Iraq returning to its secular roots

Azzaman, March 15, 2010 The results from the general elections indicate that the sectarian equation brought about in the aftermath of the occupation of Baghdad may no longer hold. We have seen Iraqis rallying behind groups which puts national interests above sectarianism. Some even go on saying that the equation has lost its balance. The evidence they cite are the results in provinces such as Nineveh, Salahuddeen, Anbar and Diyala where the electorate chose a secular coalition at the expense of an Islamist party. On the other hand, there are many who say that some other political blocs have preserved their standing by relying on sectarian support. These people add that the coalition of the State of the Law headed by outgoing Prime Minister Noor al-Maliki and the National Coalition are none but sectarian formations. This is evident in the overwhelming support they obtained in certain provinces. In the meantime, even those entertaining hopes for

the emergence of a secular state, have their doubts. They do not think that the ‘secular’ front which Ayad Allawi’s Iraqi block represents is truly secular. It has the same faces as before and the same program. Allawi’s 25 deputies lost their compass in the past years in parliament and entered into coalitions with non-secular groups. Allawi himself has been away from the Iraqi scene for more than five years. What I see as a good sign emerging from the latest elections is the fact that Iraqis are seriously thinking of national interests. This is what counts regardless of who wins. But this is just the beginning and the yearning for national interests to be placed above everything else is still in its nascent stage.

Iraq: Preliminary Surprise in the Parliamentary Polls

March 16, 2010 A campaign billboard for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad on March 11

Summary Partial results from the Iraqi parliamentary election indicate that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s ruling State of Law bloc is leading in Baghdad and the provinces to the south. The big surprise has been the victories of al-Maliki’s main rival, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, whose al-Iraqiya list seems to be sweeping the Sunni regions along Baghdad’s northern rim. The rise of al-Iraqiya, along with the fact that al-Maliki hasn’t completely dominated the Shiite south, suggests that he will have a hard time cobbling together a coalition government that is Shiite-dominated and has a reasonable degree of Sunni representation.

Analysis Former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi’s al-Iraqiya list is leading Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law (SoL) bloc, according to the latest results from the March 7 parliamentary election. The results announced by Iraq’s Electoral Commission March 16, representing about 79 percent of the vote counted from Iraq’s 18 provinces, showed Allawi with a narrow lead of about 9,000 votes over al-Maliki. Candidates’ positions will probably change as the vote-counting continues, and final results are unlikely to be available for another few weeks. A total of 325 seats — divided by provinces — are up for grabs in the election. Seats will be allocated to parties or coalitions in proportion to the number of votes they gain. Each province counts as one electoral district, which is allocated a certain number of seats relative to the size of its population. The number of valid votes cast in each electoral district is divided by the number of seats allocated to the district, thus determining the number of votes necessary to win a seat in that district. In turn, the number of votes obtained by each list is divided by the number of votes required to obtain a seat, thus determining the number of seats won by each list. Certain trends are evident in the preliminary election results. As expected, four groups have emerged as the main blocs — al-Maliki’s SoL; Allawi’s non-sectarian al-Iraqiya list; the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the main Shiite coalition; and the main Kurdish alliance. These four blocs will dominate the next Iraqi parliament. Al-Maliki’s SoL is ahead in seven provinces — Baghdad, Babil, Karbala, Muthanna, Najaf, Wasit and Basra. In Baghdad, SoL is in stiff competition with al-Iraqiya, in second place, and the INA, in third. The INA is also in a strong second position behind SoL in Muthanna, Najaf, Wassit and Babil provinces, whereas it is leading only by slim margins in Dhiqar, Qadisiya and Maysan provinces. The ruling SoL has shown its strongest performance in the southern oil-rich Basra province, where it has garnered some 150,000 more votes than the INA. Moving beyond the Shiite-dominated south, al-Maliki has been badly undercut by Allawi, his rival for the non-sectarian vote. Allawi’s al-Iraqiya is a close second — a difference so

far of 65,000 votes — behind SoL in Baghdad, which has the lion's share of seats in Parliament (70). In Baghdad, the INA is in a strong third-place position. But the main achievement of al-Iraqiya has been its ability to sweep three key Sunni provinces — Anbar, Nineveh and Salahuddin — as well as the ethnically mixed province of Diyala. Furthermore, in the highly contentious oil-rich northern province of Kirkuk, al-Iraqiya is in a close race with the main Kurdish alliance, separated by little more than a couple of hundred votes. In the three provinces of the Kurdistan region, the main Kurdish alliance maintained its hold over Dahuk and Erbil but is in a difficult spot in Suleimaniyeh, where the rising Gorran movement and the Kurdish Islamic Union between them have won about 50,000 more votes than the main Kurdish bloc. This is a major upset in terms of the traditional dominance of the Kurdistan region by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and it will likely undercut a unified Kurdish stake in the national government. At the national level, al-Maliki, whose group was vying for both the Shiite sectarian and non-sectarian (largely Sunni) votes, has achieved neither. Therefore, in terms of forming a government, SoL will be heavily relying on the INA in the Shiite south. In the Sunni provinces, al-Iraqiya has swept the ballots, which means that Sunni representation in the government will require a coalition that includes al-Iraqiya. A coalition government that contains both Shiite sectarian and Sunni forces will be tough to cobble together, since both sides will be demanding key Cabinet positions. Further complicating this scenario will be the Kurdish alliance, which will drive its own hard bargain by exploiting the sectarian divide to enhance its own ethnic stake. Since the election results are not yet final, it is still too early to tell what the composition of the next Iraqi government will be. The old Iraqi political deck has certainly been reshuffled with the rise of al-Iraqiya in the Sunni regions. What is clear at this point is that arriving at a power-sharing formula will be an excruciatingly contentious and lengthy process.

The Kurds Rule Baghdad

Friday 12 March 2010- The Kurds always dreamt of ruling their region, Kurdistan, and to be free after years of tyranny at the hands of the Saddam regime that deprived them of their own [traditional] clothing, language and culture. It was also their dream in Arbil and Sulaymaniyah to build a wall like the Great Wall of China to separate them from other parts of Arab Iraq. In the parliamentary framework, the game has changed; the minority might become a key player and this is what happened in the 2005 elections. This is not because of the predominance of Kurdish votes (that represent no more than 20 per cent of Iraqi votes) but due to its somewhat united votes unlike the divided Shia majority, and the Sunnis who boycotted the elections in protest. The Kurds never imagined that they would be the key player in the Iraqi political arena. And yet they are, for the second time, ready to play the role of kingmakers in Baghdad if they remain unified in their loyalty to the two main parties. But it seems that the Kurds, just like the Shia, do not consider their votes a free gift to be given to [a candidate] of a certain sect or race but rather to whoever promises them a better electoral program. Saddam is finished, his regime has been demolished, and he was executed and does not matter anymore. The things that matter are employment, standards of living, a hospital bed, and schools for the children; this is what a Kurd and a Shia want from whoever nominates himself to parliament. The last elections took place at a difficult time internally and the votes were also expressive of a historic position. It is thanks to the Kurdish alliance with the Daawa Party that the balance tipped in Daawa's favour and that Nouri al Maliki became prime minister. Once again, the

Kurds today hold the trump card that can determine the lucky winner of the premiership whether it will be al Maliki or someone else. Basically, if the Kurdish votes are somewhat unified in favour of the two main parties, they will decide the fate of the government in Iraq for the next four years. Therefore, the Iraqi political equation would be balanced because within it there are real competitive forces, on the religious level (Shia and Sunni) and national and ethnic forces. Therefore, the Shia majority is a not a dilemma as claimed by some Sunnis and the Arab Iraqis do not dominate the entire country as Kurds or Turkmen used to fear. The election process developed into political partisanship and electoral games based on a mathematical equation that aims to achieve a majority i.e. half the parliamentary seats plus one. Even the Kurds, the rule makers, for the first time are worried not about Arabs or sectarianism but about intellectual rebellion amongst the Kurds after opposition appeared in Kurdistan seeking to break the monopoly of the two parties for their votes. If we assume that this is what the election results will show in a few days then the Iraqis have actually become Iraqis by practice rather than just by [raising] patriotic slogans. Each person is entitled to elect in accordance with what he sees is in his own interest as a citizen rather than following a sheep mentality and merely following his sect or tribe.

The Iraq Era

Thursday 11 March 2010 Regardless of whether it is Nuri al Maliki's or Iyad Allawi's bloc that will emerge victorious in the Iraqi elections, initial indications up until the publication of this article show that Allawi has won Arab Sunni governorates and al Maliki has won Arab Shia governorates. In geographical terms, Allawi has won western Iraq and some of its northern parts, whereas al Maliki has won southern Iraq and most of the central areas of the country. So the fight for Baghdad, the jewel of the Iraqi crown, continues. Either al Maliki or Allawi will win the majority of votes but whoever wins would have done so by the skin of his teeth. What's striking is that in the electoral programs of competing lists they all praise national unity and reject sectarianism. Just for the record, the list headed by Allawi, who is a secular Shia, includes conservative Shia, while the list headed by al Maliki, who is a Shia Islamist, includes Sunni figures from Western Iraq. Moreover, new lists were formed from existing lists without us, as observers, noticing any "methodical" differences in programs and visions. For example, turbaned liberal Iyad Jamal Aldin broke away from Allawi's list and perhaps the motive behind that was the desire to compete and personal ambition. This is quite understandable as part of human nature, especially within the realm of politics. Another striking point about the Iraqi parliamentary elections is the ease with which political figures can switch from one list to another without even a second thought or without fearing that the electoral base will question the significance of this move. This phenomenon was cleverly tackled by Iraqi writer Hamid al Kafei in his latest article published in Al Hayat newspaper. Can this be attributed merely to personal aspirations to rise to power or to have a share in power regardless of any political vision or actual plan for the future? I believe the high level of tolerance shown by the Iraqi people towards the u-turns made by Iraqi politicians can be attributed to the "frailty" of the national culture in Iraq and in the entire Arab world and to the nature of instinctive partisanship that controls the public and makes it justify the actions of its party, tribal or sectarian leaders therefore changing its own directions towards the direction of its leaders. In the end, a leader manoeuvres and shifts and changes slogans to protect their instinctive supporters; slogans, policies and

ideologies are nothing but tools used to preserve the interests of the leader's supporters. Those interests boil down to the mentality of profit and gain, taking and controlling the biggest piece of the pie or the entire pie if possible! We have seen tribal sectarianism in Lebanon and how Wiam Wahab turned into an angel and spoke like Gandhi, advocating peace and harmony and sowing the seeds of love among his rivals in an attempt to get over his grievances! It is worth mentioning that Wahab used a language of mass destruction against his rivals, Syria and Iran. We also saw how Walid Jumblatt, who violated the sanctity of Hezbollah and threatened to open the gates of hell to the agents of Iran and Syria, is back today to question the patriotism of the Baath party in Lebanon and the Revolutionary Guard Corps on the outskirts [of Beirut] and in southern Lebanon. The same can be said of most other leaderships. What's amazing is that the supporters of these leaders have no problem changing their stance in accordance with their leaders' disposition! We are not talking about the necessities of pragmatism, the gracefulness of political moves and the flexibility of tactics; what counts here is preserving the essence. However, unfortunately, this essence has faded away. So what essence are we talking about? If we define politics as a front for serving national or patriotic strategies then we can safely say that politics does not exist in the Arab world. Instead, there are semi-politicians who try to fool the masses in order to remain in positions of power. Because the strength of any leader is basically determined by the influence he has among the masses and by the number of followers, he cultivates and moulds the masses right until the last moment. If that moment is a coup d'état against the ruling regime and the seizure of power, then those followers represent the fuel and the soldiers of that coup. If that moment is an act of voting via the ballot box, then those followers are driven to tick the box of their leaders. **Are voters so non-individualistic and dependent in their views?** More importantly, who is the voter? We are talking about Iraq since it is the country going through elections that are said to be decisive. There is no distinctive feature of the political character of Iraqi voters. Yes there are guaranteed voting "blocs" by virtue of the dominant partisanship but there are also other voting blocs in the background. What is interesting is the sudden transformation of Arab Sunni voters from waging on the triumphant fundamentalist discourse of Harith al Dhari or any of the Sunni hawks to adopting the choice of state secularism and lining up behind the secular Shia, Iyad Allawi. This phenomenon deserves careful consideration. Did the Sunnis of Iraq suddenly discover that a non-sectarian secular regime is the best choice in a country brimming with conflicts from past centuries and sectarian outcries? Why would secularism in the state and the nationalist logic be suitable for the Sunnis of Iraq but unsuitable for Sunnis in other Arab and Muslim countries? Why have Iraqi Shia shifted at this particular moment from sectarian violence to potential democracy or turned into democratic beings as Iraqi writer and politician Hassan al Alawi said? Why don't we see the same democratic spirit in them with respect to acknowledging the right of the majority to rule in Lebanon? Hezbollah and its allies were defeated in the Lebanese parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, Hezbollah considered the election results null and void and began talking about the particularities of Lebanon's democracy based on compatibility rather than a majority vote. Contrary to that, we would find Nuri al Maliki in Iraq speaking about the necessity of acknowledging the democratic majority and majority rule. Let us move away from the Shia circle so that people do not think, as usual, that we are trying to recommend one sect at the expense of the other. In a televised

interview I watched recently, Hassan al Alawi drew our attention to the fact that the Muslims of India, before breaking away and establishing Pakistan, were against the idea of the democratic majority in view of the predominance of Hindus over Muslims in India. That gave way to the theories of Mawdudi that denounced democracy and described it as a pre-Islamic method of ruling. He argued that governorship lies with Almighty God and not with man. The well-known Mawdudi vision was distorted and transferred to the Arab world through Sayyid Qutb. But what if Muslims had constituted a majority in India? Would they have been more enthusiastic about demanding the implementation of majority democracy? Singing the praises of democracy in a romantic fashion and waging on its success in a decisively dogmatic way is not suitable in this part of the world, as we are still stuck in the past. It is true that we have democracies, voting systems and regular elections, but only on the surface. There are no constitutional guarantees, nor is there a general culture that governs everyone and creates confidence through the alternation of power and the “civilianization” of the state. The principle of citizenship, as a foundation for the entire society to be based on, makes this confidence concrete, permanent and unalterable. That is why everyone deals with democracy in a cautious and opportunist way following the “hit and run” method. Despite all of the above, what is going on in Iraq is really worth noticing. It has become apparent that it is virtually impossible for either of the competing camps (the Sunnis or the Shia) to eliminate the other. Both denominations represent the Islamic history of Iraq. Everybody should forget the fatalist allegiance to the denomination and focus on the civil nationalist affiliation instead. This seems to be the dominant atmosphere in Iraq these days. Let us hope that Iraq will be the passage for all the people of the region to enter the world of light and social and political modernism. Who knows...light always comes from outer space.

Positive Aspects of the Iraqi Elections

Thursday 11 March 2010-That we have seen from the preliminary results of the Iraqi elections has been excellent and remarkable; the sectarian leaderships have begun to weaken in Iraq, which means that Iraq is not turning into another Lebanon at a frightening speed. Hope has been restored amongst the observers regarding the possibility of establishing a real state, not a state based on sects or [religious] guides like in Lebanon, whether Sunni, Shia or otherwise. Regardless of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki’s position, he presented himself to the Iraqi voter as part of a coalition that is not based on a religious or sectarian foundation. The same goes for the powerful return of Dr. Iyad Allawi (in fact this is even more prominent) with Sunni and Shia votes whilst he presented himself within a secular framework and calls for the Iraqi state project based on nationalism and not on foreign or sectarian dependencies. What’s pleasing about all of that is that Iraqi politicians realized what the citizens want, meaning that the politicians this time did not play on the public or public opinion; rather what happened is that Iraqi politicians raised themselves to the level of the voters and the average Iraqi citizens, which proves today (and proves that during the provincial governorate elections) they are enthusiastic about the authority of the state and its power and that they are not buying into the delusions of leaders or religious groups. There is another very important point; [Grand Ayatollah] Sayyed Ali Sistani announced that he would not intervene to support any specific party at the expense of the other in the recent elections. This is political awareness and realization of what is happening on the ground in Iraq regarding the eagerness of Iraqis not to become captive to the religious groups whose presence

dominated after the fall of the Saddam regime. Today we are witnessing the withdrawal of the Islamic Supreme Council led by Ammar al Hakim, just as we are witnessing the decline of the Sadrist trend; suffice it to say that its leader cast his vote in the last elections from Iran. Does it make any sense that a leader doesn't dare enter his own country and vote side by side with his supporters as they defied bombings and acts of violence in order to cast their votes? In fact where was Ahmad Chalabi along with everything his name symbolizes? All of that means that Iraq is fine; it is true that it is not in its best of states but it did not fall into the abyss of the pure sectarian regime and it did not get to the stage whereby the ruler [of such a regime] is a person like Hassan Nasrallah with illegal weapons and with an Iranian cover, and this is all thanks to the public awareness which deserves a lot of appreciation as this awareness surpassed that of many politicians in Iraq. It is true the above paints a rosy picture of Iraq, and this would be untruthful as Iraq and the Iraqis still have a long way to go. But what happened is a positive thing that deserves to be highlighted, therefore, the next few days will be important; if the political bloc succeeds in forming a government that reflects the concerns of Iraq and the Iraqis then this means that we will witness the welcome return of Iraq that we have missed and the Iraqis themselves have missed. Whoever believes that we are waiting for an allied Iraq on a sectarian basis is wrong; rather, we are waiting for an Iraq based on the interests of its citizens to be an effective element and beneficial to all regional issues, the most important of which is to strengthen rationalism in a region where patience has been exhausted.

Geo strategic front

Iraq's governor asks for international tribunal to investigate minority violations

Azzaman, March 17, 2010 The Governor of the Province of Nineveh has asked the United Nations and the European Union to undertake an international investigation into attacks targeting Iraqi minorities in his province. Atheel al-Nujaifi said violence against minorities in Nineveh, of which the northern city of Mosul is the capital, has surged recently. He said Christians were being forced to flee and some of them have been killed. Other minorities like the Shebek and Yazidis are under immense pressure and targets of mounting violence, he said. In a letter which he also address to Prime Minister Noori al-Maliki and commander of U.S. occupation troops in Iraq, Nujaifi said: "I would like to present before you the suffering of my people in the Province of Nineveh and particularly members of Iraqi minorities which started in the past few years and in the aftermath of 2003." Nujaifi pointed the finger at Kurdish militias and the political factions they belong to. He said the armed Kurdish militias were in control of large swathes of his province, including the left bank of its capital, Mosul. "Kurdish factions have turned the minorities into pawns in their agendas," he said. "They (the Kurds) pay no attention to the desire of these minorities to live in peace." He said members of these minorities were being forced to alter their ethnic belonging so that their areas would be annexed to the Kurdish semi-independent enclave. "Those opposing the Kurdish agenda are persecuted, threatened, arrested and even liquidated," he said. Kurdish leaders have declined comment on Nujaifi's accusation, but last year a report by Human Rights Watch charged that the Kurds were partners in the persecution of minorities and not their protectors.

Iraq lashes out at European countries repatriating refugees by force

Azzaman, March 12, 2010 Iraq has criticized western countries with plans to force Iraqi refugees on their territories to return home. The spokesman for the Ministry of Migration and Resettlement, Karim al-Saaidi, said any plans for the Iraqi refugees in Europe to return home "Should be voluntary." Northern European states, such as Sweden and Norway, as well as Holland, have threatened to force thousands of Iraqi refugees to return. These countries, al-Saaidi said, were the "most liberal and hospitable" to Iraqi refugees seeking asylum. He said the success of the general elections and the relative stability in the country should not be taken as a pretext for enforced repatriation. "The return of Iraqi refugee should not only be voluntary but also in accordance with a plan that needs to be drawn by joint committees," he said. Saaidi did not say whether Iraq would be willing to receive the Iraqi refugees these countries compel to return. In the past, the government in Baghdad accepted planeloads of Iraqi refugees who were rounded up, handcuffed and put on planes bound for Baghdad. The regional government in Iraqi Kurdistan has said it would not let any Iraqi refugee enter its territory if it appeared they were not returning by their own will.

Economic front

Social front

Annual U.S. Rights Report Cites Suffering Of War-Zone Civilians

The U.S. State Department's annual human rights report says more than 30 wars and armed conflicts around the world are fueling human rights abuses, including what it calls "an alarming number of reports of torture, extrajudicial killings, and other violations of universal human rights." The annual report, which is mandated by U.S. Congress, is actually 194 individual country reports on human rights practices, which are researched and written to provide what the State Department says is "the most comprehensive record available of the condition of human rights around the world." The reports criticize or praise the human rights records of U.S. friends and foes alike. At the report's release, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the reports give the United States a "good assessment of the situation on the ground" in the places where it wants to make a difference on human rights. "The reports released today are a record of where we are. They provide a fact base that will inform the United States' diplomatic, economic, and strategic policies toward other countries in the coming year," she said. "These reports are not intended to prescribe such policies, but they provide essential data points for everyone in the United States government working on them." *Essential Tool* For human rights activists and governments around the world, Clinton said the information is a useful tool to help gauge progress and identify areas where problems remain. "These reports are an essential tool for activists who courageously struggle to protect rights in communities around the world, for journalists and scholars who document rights violations and who report on the work of those who champion the vulnerable, and for governments, including our own, as they work to craft strategies to encourage protection of human rights of more individuals in more places," Clinton said. A major finding of the report is that where armed conflict or wars raged in 2009, "noncombatant civilians faced human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law." In many of these conflict zones, the report says, "insurgents, terrorist organizations, paramilitary forces, and government security forces used murder, rape, and inhumane tactics to assert control

over territory, silence opponents, and coerce the cooperation of civilian communities." The report singles out civilians in **Afghanistan** in particular as having endured the worst violence in their country last year. With one-third of the country in deep conflict, the State Department says the Afghan government has been unable to adequately protect people living in rural areas. On **Iraq**, the report cites accounts of unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government or its agents in connection with the 7-year-old war there. It says bombings by insurgents and terrorists, executions, and other killings affected all regions and sectors of society. Violence against journalists in the country also continued, and there were frequent attacks by insurgent and extremist groups on places of worship and religious leaders, as well as sectarian violence.

New Restrictions Imposed The report says in 2009 many governments continued to exert control over what information their citizens could receive by restricting public gatherings, Internet use, radio, television and print media. In many countries, civil society groups were prevented from operating by new laws aimed at blocking their work. The assistant U.S. secretary of democracy, human rights, and labor, Michael Posner, cited a finding from the National Endowment for Democracy. "No less than 25 governments in the last couple of years have imposed new restrictions on nongovernmental, human rights, and other organizations -- the right to organize, the right to assemble, the right to gather and collect funds from abroad," Posner said. The report states that **Iran's** poor human rights record only got worse during 2009. Iran's "already poor human right situation rapidly deteriorated after the June elections," Posner said. "At least 45 people were killed in clashes. Thousands were arrested. Another thousand were arrested in demonstrations in December. It is a place where we are continuing to see severe repression of dissent and are continuing to pay great attention." Aside from the election, the report says prison conditions in Iran often were unacceptable, and that prisoners often were held in solitary confinement and otherwise abused. The government also waged a crackdown against advocates for the rights of women, ethnic minorities, student activists, and religious minorities, the report says, and severely restricted its citizens' privacy and access to a free news media. In **Belarus**, the State Department says the government's human rights record "remained very poor as civil liberties, including freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and religion, continued to be restricted." Although Belarus has a bicameral national legislature and a governing cabinet under a prime minister, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has directly run all the country's institutions since he was elected president in 1994, the State Department said. It says Belarus human rights record remained -- in its words -- "very poor" in 2009, as Lukashenka has undermined the rule of law and manipulated elections since 1994, and that the parliamentary vote in September 2008 didn't meet international standards. The report says civilian leaders effectively maintained control of the country's military, but adds that members of the armed forces nevertheless commit human rights abuses. For example, the Minsk government couldn't account for politically motivated disappearances, the document says, while prisoners are abused in government custody, and prison conditions are extremely poor. The government also maintained the practice of arresting and imprisoning its citizens for such political crimes as criticizing state officials or joining demonstrations. The report also highlighted discrimination against the ethnic Polish population and Roma. It said authorities continued to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles, its head Andzelika Borys, and her associates. **Georgia** had serious human rights deficiencies in 2009, the report says, but it

also had what it calls "significant" human rights achievements in the same year. The report says that country -- whose latest national elections, in 2008, were flawed -- saw at least one death that may have been caused by an excessive use of force by police, as well as poor prisons, abuse of prisoners, arbitrary arrest and detention, and politically motivated imprisonment and assaults. The government also used excessive force in breaking up demonstrations, a lack of due judicial process, government pressure on the judiciary, and corruption in the government, according to the document. "I think what we see in this year's report, as we have in previous reports, is that Georgia is still very much a society in transition. It is a society in transition from a past and a legacy of occupation and totalitarian government and conflict for many years in the recent past. And transitioning out of that legacy is more than simply a matter of passing a certain number of laws, joining a certain number of international bodies," U.S. Ambassador to Georgia John Bass told RFE/RL's Georgian Service. But 2009 also saw the passage of a reformed criminal code providing for fair trials, and an amended election code for the direct election of the mayor of Tbilisi, the capital. "We actually assess that the degree of media freedom has declined, and that obviously is an area of concern for us," Bass added in connection with the report. Meanwhile, human rights flagged in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, at the expense of ethnic Georgians. **'Neither Free Nor Fair' Russia** is cited for its efforts to "weaken freedom of expression and media independence" by influencing the editorial direction of state-owned media companies and pressuring the few independent media organizations left to produce only positive coverage. The report called the country's presidential election in 2008 "neither fair nor free." It also pointed to what it called "direct and indirect government interference" in regional and local elections. While civilian authorities mostly maintained control of Russia's military, the State Department says, that was not the case in the North Caucasus. The document also cites many reports of human rights problems at the hands of the government and others, as well as police abuses and corruption, harsh prison conditions, and the killings of human rights activists and investigative journalists, including Natalya Estemirova, who was known for documenting cases of killings, torture, and disappearances that she linked to authorities in Chechnya. As a result of violence and the harassment of reporters, the report says, news in Russia is self-censored. It also reports continued extra-judicial killings in the North Caucasus, where Moscow is fighting insurgents. The State Department report states that **Ukraine** is a democracy whose parliamentary elections have been widely viewed as free and fair, and its military is properly controlled by the country's civilian leadership. Nevertheless, the report says, human rights problems persist two decades after Ukraine achieved independence from the Soviet Union. The document points to what it calls reports of "serious police abuse," including the beating and even torture of people in custody. Prison conditions are also harsh, the report says, and pretrial detention is long and arbitrary. The country's judiciary is corrupt, and corruption is widespread in the government and throughout society. Furthermore, anti-Semitism is not uncommon, according to the study. The document cites instances of violence and discrimination against women, children, homosexuals, Roma, Crimean Tatars, and people of what the document called "non-Slavic appearance." It highlights human trafficking as another serious problem. Limits also were put on workers' ability to join trade unions. On a positive note, the report says 2009 saw the establishment of an office to fight corruption,

and another to keep better track of hate crimes. The U.S. criticizes the government of **Uzbekistan** for tightly controlling the media and not allowing the publication of views critical of the government. **Vulnerable Groups Targeted** The report also identifies a trend in the past year where members of vulnerable groups -- racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; the disabled; women and children; migrant workers; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals -- were marginalized or became targets of societal or government-sanctioned abuse. It points to an uptick in the number of killings and violence against members of the Roma minority in **Italy, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic**, and notes that the group as a whole has suffered racial profiling, official discrimination, and mistreatment by the police. In **China**, the report says the government's already "poor" human rights record is worsening against minorities, public interest lawyers, and people thought to oppose the state. It says the government's repression of Uyghurs and Tibetans, in particular, has led to long prison terms, extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, and executions. In many countries in the **Middle East**, the State Department found evidence that violence against women, violations of the rights of children, and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity "were common."

U.S. denies trading in Iraqi prisoners' body organs

Azzaman, March 19, 2010 The U.S. occupation army in Iraq denied reports that its members traded in body parts belonging to Iraqi inmates incarcerated in its jails in the country. A Jordanian held in a U.S. prison in Iraq and later released had said that U.S. prison wardens and soldiers stole organs from Iraqi inmates in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. U.S. troops have admitted committing horrendous rights violations of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. The violations were highlighted by international media. However, a senior U.S. army information officer flatly denied reports in the Jordanian press of plundering body parts of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. "The U.S. army rejects such accusations which are contrary to human rights," the officer said. "There is no grain of truth behind the reports that the U.S. army stole body parts belonging to Iraqi prisoners in its jails," the officer added. Jordanian newspapers had quoted Ahmad Ghurab, the Jordanian citizen jailed by the U.S. in Iraq, that U.S. troops "use organs of Iraqi prisoners as spare parts for their soldiers." "U.S. troops rounded up the homeless and lunatic Iraqis from the streets and I saw them bringing them to Abu Ghraib prison where their organs were taken away and sent to American hospitals for the treatment of U.S. soldiers," Ghurab was reported as saying. He said some inmates had their eyes gouged, others their hands or legs amputated or their kidneys removed. "These people had no families to ask for them," he added. Ghurab was jailed in 2004 and released in 2005.

Scores of fleeing Christian families return to Mosul

Azzaman, March 14, 2010 Scores of Christian families who had fled the northern Iraqi city of Mosul have returned. A statement by the Province of Nineveh, of which Mosul is the capital, said many of the returning families even took part in the general elections. The families had fled in the aftermath of a surge in anti-Christian violence in the restive city. Mosul was a main center for the Christian minority in Iraq. But hundreds of Christian families are reported to have left the city for good since the 2003-U.S. invasion. The statement said more than 50 families have returned. It is not clear how many families had fled the city recently. Christian sources spoke of hundreds. The statement said Iraqi

security forces accompanied the returning families and had them resettled in the same areas and houses they had fled from. “Christians working in the public sector have returned to their original jobs and those in the private sector to their workshops,” the statement said.

Violence surge in restive Iraq’s Mosul and Falluja

Azzaman, March 16, 2010 The cities of Mosul and Falluja have been the scene of violent attacks targeting Iraqi troops and civilians among Muslim clerics in the past few days. Scores of people were killed or injured in these attacks. In Mosul a senior Muslim cleric was killed along with an army officer and numerous soldiers. The Imam (cleric) of a mosque in al-Zahra neighborhood in Mosul, Sheikh Dawood al-Anzi, was attacked in his home and died shortly after of severe wounds, a police statement faxed to the newspaper said. Six more people were killed in Mosul in the same day, the statement added. An explosion in Yarmouk, another of Mosul’s neighborhoods, targeted a police patrol, killing five police officers. Two civilians in the same area were killed. The statement said sporadic clashes between security forces and unidentified gunmen take place on a daily basis across the city. Gunmen driving speeding cars open fire on passers-by or target civilians in residential areas. No day passes in Mosul without reports of such incidents, the statement added. Insurgents have intensified their attacks in Falluja, once one of Iraq’s most violent cities. A police statement said suicide bombings have increased and at least 20 people were either killed or injured in one such attack this week. Insurgents are reported to be attacking bridges and highways west of Baghdad, the area which almost two years ago was a haven for Iraq’s branch of al-Qaeda. Armed groups reported to be al-Qaeda operatives now attack Sunni clerics who denounce their violence and terrorist actions. Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Karbouli, a member of Muslim Scholars Commission, a powerful Sunni clerical body, was killed in the Province of Anbar of which Ramadi is the capital.

Lebanon

Political front

March 14 submits seven-point plan to protect Lebanon

March 14, 2010 Lebanonwire- Protecting Lebanon was the focus of the March 14 alliance meeting at the Bristol Hotel on Sunday. March 14 General Secretariat Coordinator Fares Soueid briefed the press after the gathering, which he said was aimed at guaranteeing the well-being of all Lebanese, despite their political and sectarian differences. “Protecting Lebanon is a national, Arab and international responsibility,” he said. Regionally, Lebanon is threatened by Israel, according to Soueid. It refuses to work towards peace and continues to build settlements, he added. He also cited Iran’s nuclear program as a danger to the country and region. “We want to see the country united and free, fully Lebanese and fully Arab,” Soueid added. Despite any mistakes that were made, the Cedar Revolution will continue until its goals are achieved, the March 14 General Secretariat coordinator said. With that, Soueid introduced a seven-point plan to “preserve the safety of the Lebanese people,” and called on the Lebanese to develop and elaborate on it. *The following are the seven points of the March 14 alliance’s plan:*

1. Everyone should be committed to the decisions reached in the national dialogue, and dedicated to establishing normal relations with Syria. The national defense strategy is the only remaining issue that needs to be discussed in the national dialogue. For the sake of the state's well-being, all parties should cooperate in the dialogue.
2. Internal disagreement is one thing, but facing occupation is another. Any Israeli attack on any part of Lebanon is an attack on the entire country – and any attack will be met by a unified stance.
3. Political parties should commit to the notion that national defense is the responsibility of the Lebanese state, its army and institutions.
4. Lebanon should not be used to set off war in the region, under any circumstance.
5. The Lebanese army is solely responsible for retaliating against any Israeli attack, and will notify the cabinet under such circumstances. Only the government has the right to assess the situation and take steps accordingly.
6. The March 14 alliance requests the government appeal to the Arab League to fulfill its responsibility to protect Lebanon on the basis of Arab solidarity. The Arab League should be included in the [national dialogue] discussions on creating a national defense strategy for Lebanon.
7. The March 14 alliance calls on the Lebanese state to solicit the international community for help in ensuring the strict implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. It is the government's responsibility to ensure the effective execution of Resolution 1701.

The March 14 alliance also announced its support for the following:

- A) Creating a Lebanese civil society to ensure a "societal safety net."
- B) Insisting that Arab countries support Lebanon and protect Arab co-existence which is symbolized in the country. Also, an effort to move away from abusing ideology, in order to serve a certain state or political party.
- C) Requesting that foreign countries assist in presenting Lebanon as a country that can play a vital role in the region and world through the model of unique citizens, and as a show of support for the Arab peace initiative, world peace, stability, and the settlement of sectarian disputes.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri did not attend Sunday's March 14 alliance meeting, which fell on the fifth anniversary of the group's formation, because he is on an official trip to Germany. -Now Lebanon

Geo strategic front

Beirut rejects Tripoli's invite to Arab summit

March 15, 2010- Lebanonwire- Lebanon has rejected "for administrative reasons" Libya's invitation to an Arab summit later this month, the foreign ministry said on Monday. "The invitation was received by the Lebanese embassy in Damascus, which is not authorised to receive and respond to this invitation for administrative reasons," the ministry said in a statement. Last week a top government official said that President Michel Sleiman would not attend the March 27-28 summit in Libya because of a dispute with Tripoli over the 1978 disappearance of leading Shiite cleric Mussa Sadr. Sleiman would not take part in the summit in Libya in response to a request made by parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a Shiite who heads the Amal movement founded by Sadr, the official said on Friday. Sadr -- who is still regarded by Lebanon's Shiite community as a

key spiritual guide -- vanished on August 31, 1978, and the circumstances of his disappearance are still a mystery. He was last seen in Libya. In 2008 Lebanon issued an arrest warrant for Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi over the disappearance of the imam while he was in Tripoli with two companions, who also went missing with him. Libya has denied involvement in Sadr's disappearance, saying he left the country for Italy. But the Italian government has always denied he ever arrived there. In 2004, however, Italian authorities returned a passport found in Italy belonging to the imam. -AFP

Jumblatt says his criticism of Syria was improper

March 14, 2010- Lebanonwire- One of Syria's harshest critics in Lebanon has now said his earlier statements were "improper" and called for a new page in relations between the two countries. A reconciliation between Walid Jumblatt, the influential leader of the Druse sect, and Damascus could boost Syria's role in Lebanese politics years after its troops were forced out of the country. For five years following the truck bomb assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Jumblatt was a stern critic of Syria. In recent months, however, he has broken with his former Western-backed allies. His comments come as Syria is emerging from its isolation and is improving relations with Arab and Western states. Jumblatt's harshest verbal attack against Syrian President Bashar Assad came on Feb. 14, 2007 in a speech marking Hariri's assassination. He told a crowd of tens of thousands of supporters that Assad was a "snake" and a "tyrant" and called for revenge against him. Many Lebanese blame Syria for the assassination, a charge Syria denies. "These comments were improper, unfamiliar and unsuited to political ethics," Jumblatt said in a live interview with Al-Jazeera satellite channel late Saturday. "I said, at a moment of anger, what is improper and illogical against President Bashar Assad. It was a moment of ultimate internal tension and division in Lebanon." "Is it possible for them to overcome this moment and open a new page?" he added. There was no comment from Damascus but Syrian state-run newspapers, Al-Thawra, Tishrin and Al-Baath published Jumblatt's comments on their front pages Sunday. The comments might well result in a Syrian invitation to visit Damascus. A shrewd politician known for his shifting loyalties, Jumblatt walked out from the Western-backed coalition last year and said he will take a neutral stance in Lebanese politics. Also in 2009, Jumblatt reconciled with Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, one of Syria's strongest allies in Lebanon. Nasrallah is said to be working for reconciliation between Jumblatt and Syria. Jumblatt, 60, was the main force behind the creation of a Western-backed alliance that led massive street protests to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon following Hariri's assassination. The Syrians pulled their army out of Lebanon in April 2005 ending nearly three decades of domination of their smaller neighbor. A longtime leftist and a one-time close Syrian ally, Jumblatt shifted after Hariri's assassination to the Western-backed camp after being a main beneficiary of Syrian goodwill when Damascus had the final say in Lebanese affairs for close to 30 years. Since the 2005 break with Damascus, however, he became a staunch critic of Syria in Lebanon, calling for the overthrow of Assad's regime and blaming Syria for the 1977 killing of his father. Tensions between Jumblatt's Druse followers and his allies on one side and Nasrallah's Shiite militants erupted in street fighting in Beirut in May 2008, killing 81 people and nearly plunging Lebanon into another civil war. Since the clashes, Jumblatt has moderated his anti-Syrian rhetoric. -AP

Lebanon's Jumblatt makes overtures to Syria

March 14, 2010 Lebanonwire– Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt on Saturday called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to turn the page on the past, admitting that he had in a moment of anger said inappropriate things. The former virulent critic of the Damascus regime admitted to Al-Jazeera satellite television channel in an interview that he had made "inappropriate and unreasonable remarks about President Assad at a time of internal tensions and extreme division within Lebanon." "In order to consolidate Lebanon-Syria relations, between the two peoples and two states and between the Druze of Lebanon and Syria, can we now overlook this moment and open a new page?" he asked rhetorically. He was referring to a speech he made on February 14, 2007, the second anniversary of the murder in Beirut by a massive car bomb of Lebanon's former premier Rafiq Hariri. Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from its tiny neighbour shortly after the killing following a 29-year presence. In his 2007 speech, Jumblatt branded Assad "the dictator of Damascus... a savage... an Israeli product, a liar... and a criminal." On Saturday he said his remarks were "unworthy and unusual, unsuited to the ethics of politics even during a quarrel." In 2005 Jumblatt accused Syria of killing both Hariri -- father of current Prime Minister Saad Hariri -- and his own father Kamal in 1977. He said he would not personally go on March 16 to the tomb of his father for the anniversary of his assassination, in order to "turn this personal page for a new future." In January Jumblatt told AFP in an interview he was close to reconciling with former arch-foe Syria. "I believe that three-quarters of the road to Syria has opened up and what remains is the final gesture which depends on the right moment," he said. The 60-year-old hereditary chieftain of Lebanon's Druze minority has come under fire since defecting last August from the US-backed ruling coalition he helped create in order to move closer to the Hezbollah-led opposition supported by Syria and Iran. Jumblatt said his U-turn was necessary to preserve the peace and avoid sectarian bloodshed. "I am willing to sacrifice everything for the civil peace even if my decisions are not popular," he said. "One must at times swim against the current." Asked on Saturday if his comments were aimed at preparing the ground for a Damascus visit, Jumblatt said: "If Syria's leaders can consign this incident to history, they may decide on that. If I receive an invitation, I would have no objections." -AFP

Israel, Hezbollah rhetoric raises spectre of new war

March 14, 2010 Lebanonwire: A recent wave of bellicose rhetoric between Israel and Lebanon has fuelled fears the two hostile neighbours could be headed for another conflict, the UN special coordinator for Lebanon said on Friday. Exchanges of threats between Israel and neighbouring Lebanon "have generated concerns of a renewed confrontation", Michael Williams told reporters after briefing the 15-nation Security Council on compliance with resolution 1701, which called for an end to Israel's war against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. "This rhetoric and brinkmanship contravenes the very spirit of 1701 and is utterly unhelpful," he said. "I have called, and still call, on all relevant parties to desist from inflammatory statements." *Committed to peace* Williams said that Israeli and Lebanese officials have told him privately that they remain committed to peace. Lebanese and Syrian officials have been accusing Israel of pushing for a new war in the Middle East against the backdrop of an Iranian nuclear programme that Israel considers a threat to its very survival. Iran rejects Israeli and Western allegations that its nuclear programme is a covert plan to acquire an atomic weapons capability. The oil-producing nation says its nuclear ambitions are limited to the peaceful

generation of electricity. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said earlier this year that Israel was not planning any imminent attack on Lebanon, from where Hezbollah launched some 4,000 rockets at it during a 33-day war in 2006. Defence Minister Ehud Barak was recently quoted by Israel's Haaretz newspaper as saying that Hezbollah now has some 45,000 missiles and rockets in Lebanon, higher than previous estimates. "We don't need this conflict but if it is imposed upon us, we will not run after every individual terrorist but we will take ... the Lebanese government and the Lebanese infrastructure as part of the equation facing us," he was quoted as saying. **Violations** The leader of the Lebanese group Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said last month that his organisation would hit Israel's Ben Gurion airport if the Jewish state once again attacked Beirut's international airport in any future war. "If you bomb the airport of martyr Rafik Hariri in Beirut, we will bomb Ben Gurion's airport in Tel Aviv," Nasrallah said. Thousands of supporters waved their fists in the air and chanted, "At your service, Nasrallah." "If you bomb our ports, we will bomb your ports. If you bomb our oil refineries, we will bomb your oil refineries," said Nasrallah. "If you bomb our factories, we will bomb your factories. If you bomb our electricity stations, we will bomb your electricity stations." Lebanese authorities have also complained about Israeli espionage in Lebanon and have arrested dozens of people on suspicion of spying for Israel. -Reuters

Arab-Israeli conflict root of all our wars: Hariri

March 13, 2010 Lebanonwire The failure of the international community to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at the heart of Lebanon's tense relationship with the Jewish state, which is seeking a pretext to strike against the country, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri said yesterday in an exclusive interview. "War in the region has never been due to a decision taken by Lebanon. Any war is a direct result of inaction on the part of the international community and the failure to move seriously on the peace process," the 39-year old son of assassinated Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri said in Beirut, ahead of a three day visit to Germany starting tomorrow. Israel and Lebanon have traded threats in recent months over the apparent build-up of forces by militant Shiite group Hezbollah along the border between the two states. In 2006 Israel invaded southern Lebanon and bombed Beirut in response to what it saw as the Hezbollah threat. Hezbollah and Lebanon's other political factions have returned to the so-called National Dialogue despite tensions over the fact that the Shiite group - now a part of the government - refuses to concede that it having its own heavily armed militia is at odds with democratic politics. **Hariri brushes over the arms issue.** "This is not the first time that Hezbollah has been part of the government. This goes to show how the Israelis are always looking for pretexts. Hezbollah is represented in parliament as a result of democratic elections." The Lebanese Shiite Movement, which has vowed to keep its arsenal to defend the southern border has 13 members in parliament and two ministers in Hariri's government. Hariri said he will travel tomorrow to Berlin to "discuss the regional situation and how to protect Lebanon from regional conflicts". Berlin has been active in Middle East peace moves this year, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak have all held talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel. "All wars with Israel, in which Lebanon has been the victim of, have been launched by Israel, not by us, and Lebanon is the one who paid a very high price, in human lives, displaced people and destroyed infrastructure," Hariri said. "The problem is that we live in a volatile region. It all boils down to what got us to be in this

situation of regional instability, and the answer to that is failure to do anything on the peace process, particularly for the Palestinians and their rights,” he said. Hariri said his talks in Berlin will tackle ways to boost cooperation with Germany which contributes to the United Nations peacekeeping force that monitors Lebanon’s borders with Israel. Lebanon’s National Dialogue has the aim of putting in place a defence strategy for the country. Some parties have objected to Hezbollah’s military activities and called for its disarmament. “Lebanon is a democracy. And any democracy has its differences. Is there unity among the Lebanese on absolutely every single issue? Frankly, no, because in reality this is simply impossible. But there is definitely unity among the Lebanese on dialogue, on managing our differences, and on providing safety and civic rights to our citizens,” he said. Hariri warned of growing political extremism given the failure to date of the Mideast peace process. “Today fighting extremism is not the responsibility of one country alone, it is the responsibility of the whole world. In our region, for instance, extremists are unfortunately gaining audience, at the expense of moderates, by simply asking one simple question: Show us one achievement in the domain of Palestinians rights to a state, a capital, a right of return, any domain of their rights, after 62 years of plight, of which almost four decades of attempts at a negotiated settlement,” he said. Lebanon has suffered a series of terror attacks over the last five years, including the massive bombing that killed Rafik Hariri in 2005. Many have blamed the wave of killings on Syria, which denied the accusations but was then forced to end 29 years of military occupation in Lebanon. -DPA

Palestinian Armed Struggle chief insists on retaining position in Lebanon camps

March 15, 2010 Lebanonwir: Head of the Palestinian Armed Struggle in Lebanon told pan-Arab newspaper Ash-Sharq al-Awsat in remarks published Sunday that he retained his position and “will not leave the camps no matter what.” Muneer-al-Maqdah commented on the recent appointments and rearrangements within Fatah which included talks about his dismissal. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decided to reorganize the faction’s leadership in Lebanon when he sent a military delegation to tour Palestinian refugee camps in the country in January. Among the main changes were assigning Fatah commander in Lebanon, Brigadier Sultan Abu al-Aynayn as Abbas’ adviser for Palestinian refugee affairs in Ramallah and the dismissal of Maqdah. “There is a strong and considerable alliance inside Fatah and this is not the way things should be inside refugee camps in Lebanon,” Maqdah said in response to talks about an alliance between Abu al-Aynayn, Mohammad Dahlan and Toufic al-Tirawi, the former chief of Palestinian intelligence. He added that his own stances had always been the same but Palestinian authorities were taking false reports about him into consideration. Nonetheless, Maqdah did not confirm his removal from his position and explained that no one had talked to him about the matter, and he only had received a message from Tirawi on behalf of Abbas saying: “Choose a position that you find adequate and we will relocate you.” He added that he found the new appointments strange in the way they were taken, saying that they did not follow the usual official procedures followed in Fatah. “A presidential representative should arrive on Sunday to hold meetings with the Lebanese government and I will speak with him. For now I am still in my position and nothing has changed ... I will not leave the camps no matter what,” Maqdah said. The Fatah reorganization was not the only decision made by Abbas that sparked controversy within Palestinian factions. Many criticized his approval to disarm Palestinian refugees inside and outside Palestinian

refugee camps in Lebanon, saying the decision came at a time when tensions between the Palestinians were high. -Daily Star

UN plays down risk of renewed Lebanon-Israel strife

March 13, 2010 Lebanonwire- A top UN official on Friday played down risk of renewed fighting between Israel and Lebanon's Shiite movement Hezbollah but urged the two sides to refrain from further "inflammatory" words. Michael Williams, the UN special coordinator for Lebanon, told reporters that he briefed the Security Council "on the recent rise in rhetoric and public threats between Israel and Lebanon which have generated concerns of a renewed confrontation." "This public rhetoric and brinkmanship contravenes the spirit of (Security Council) Resolution 1701 and is utterly unhelpful," he noted. Resolution 1701 ended a 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah that killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and more than 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers. It has not led to a permanent ceasefire. Williams said that in his private talks with Israeli and Lebanese officials, both sides, in contrast to some of their public utterances, "continue to express their commitment to the prevailing cessation of hostilities and to the full implementation of Resolution 1701." "I believe that it is these private statements, rather than the public rhetoric, that convey their true intentions and I have called on all relevant parties to desist from inflammatory statements," he added. Last month, Israel accused Beirut of allowing Hezbollah to smuggle weapons into Lebanon in "blatant violation" of UN resolutions. Israeli officials also warned that any attack by Hezbollah would spark a tough response against Lebanon as a whole, and they have also been locked in a war of words with Syria, a main supporter of Hezbollah. And Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah vowed to unleash his guerrilla group's military might on Israel's infrastructure, including Tel Aviv airport, should Israel attack Lebanon. Damascus for its part said it would back "the government and people of Lebanon against any possible Israeli aggression launched on Lebanon." But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later sought to ease tensions, saying his country wants peace with all its neighbours. -AFP

Hezbollah: Syria wants to open new page with Jumblat

March 15, 2010 Lebanonwire – Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is ready to turn a page on the past by meeting Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Hezbollah, which is mediating between the former arch-foes, said on Monday. The Lebanese Shiite group's leader Hassan Nasrallah "has advised Jumblatt that given recent developments, the Syrian authorities will forget the past and open a new page," it said in a statement. "President Assad will receive him in Damascus during a visit on a date to be announced in the coming days," Hezbollah added. The announcement came two days after the Druze leader admitted he had made "inappropriate and unreasonable remarks about President Assad at a time of internal tensions and extreme division within Lebanon." On February 14, 2007, the second anniversary of the murder of Lebanon's premier Rafiq Hariri, Jumblatt had branded Assad "the dictator of Damascus... a savage... an Israeli product, a liar... and a criminal." On Saturday, however, he said in an interview with Al-Jazeera television that his remarks were "unworthy and unusual, unsuited to the ethics of politics even during a quarrel."

Economic front

Lebanon yet to receive official invite to Libya Arab Summit

March 13, 2010 Lebanonwire, Asharq Al-Awsat - Lebanon is yet to receive an official invite to the Arab Summit that will be held in Libya at the end of this month. It has been confirmed that Lebanese President Michel Sleiman will not attend the summit. The Lebanese President previously told Asharq Al-Awsat that this subject is “problematic” and denied the option of taking part. This was also confirmed yesterday by a ministerial source in Lebanon who said that the Lebanese President will not take part in the Arab Summit scheduled to take place in Libya against the backdrop of the suspicions surrounding Libya with regards to the disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr. A senior Lebanese source responded to comments published in Asharq Al-Awsat by a Libyan source who stated that Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi would not extend an invite to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to take part in the summit “so as not to waste it.” The Lebanese source told Asharq Al-Awsat that Gaddafi is trying to “put on an Arab exterior.” The official who spoke to Asharq Al-Awsat on the condition of anonymity added that these comments are “a shame to the Arabs and Muslims and the Islamic Republic...Gaddafi is trying to portray false heroism when he knows that even if he sent dozens of invites to President Ahmadinejad he would not visit Libya as long as the truth is not revealed about the case of Imam Musa Sadr, the founder of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council, and his two companions, who went missing on an official visit to Libya in 1978.” Arab diplomatic sources in Beirut told Asharq Al-Awsat that Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa will visit Beirut on March 18 to discuss Lebanese representation at the Arab Summit with political leaders. The sources also stated that Moussa informed Lebanese leaders who contacted him that he had explained to Libyan officials that they are committing “a big mistake” if they fail to invite Lebanon to the summit in the customary timely manner and in accordance with the methods of the Arab League. Amr Moussa told the Lebanese, “If Lebanon does not take part [in the Arab Summit] this will harm it and the Arab League states,” and considered the dispute “not enough of a justification not to attend,” and he gave many examples in this context. On his part, a ministerial Lebanese source stated Friday that the president of the republic [of Lebanon] will not take part in the Arab Summit in Libya and confirmed that Sleiman “will not take part in the summit on the basis that some Lebanese [politicians] requested this from him, including Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.” The source further explained that “the Lebanese government is yet to receive an official invite to take part in the summit,” indicating that Gaddafi sent delegates to a number of Arab countries with invites to the summit. The source concluded by indicating that the “level of Lebanese representation will be decided taking into consideration the Libyan invite.” Lebanese sources told Asharq Al-Awsat that the maximum level of representation that Lebanon can provide at this summit is a delegation headed by the Acting Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri. The sources explained that Mitri’s participation is not definite and is pending an “internal agreement.” The sources indicated that Shia figure Nabih Berri is rejecting any kind of participation and might accept participation at the level of the “charge d’affaires at the Lebanese embassy” in West Tripoli.

Lebanon to snub Arab League summit: official

March 13, 2010 Lebanonwire – Lebanon’s president will not attend an Arab League summit in Libya because of a dispute between both countries over the 1978 disappearance of a leading Shiite cleric, a top official said on Friday. "President Michel Sleiman will not take part in the summit in Libya based on a request by speaker of

parliament Nabih Berri," the government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP. Shiite leader Mussa Sadr vanished on August 31, 1978, and the circumstances of his disappearance are still a mystery. He was last seen in Libya. Sadr, who founded the Amal movement now led by Berri, is still regarded by Lebanon's Shiite community as a key spiritual guide. In 2008 Lebanon issued an arrest warrant for Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi over the disappearance of the imam while he was in Tripoli with two companions, who also went missing with him. The government official said it was unclear who would represent Beirut at the March 27-28 summit. "With two weeks left before the summit, Lebanon has yet to receive an official invitation," he said. Berri in February had called for Lebanon to boycott the event. Libya has denied involvement in Sadr's disappearance, saying he left the country for Italy. But the Italian government has always denied he ever arrived there. In 2004, however, Italian authorities returned a passport found in Italy belonging to the imam. -AFP

Social front

World's richest man, Carlos Slim, visits Lebanon

March 13, 2010 Lebanonwire- Mexican telecom tycoon Carlos Slim Helu, who this week topped the Forbes magazine list of the world's richest billionaires, held talks in Beirut Friday aimed at boosting investments between the two countries. Slim, the son of Lebanese immigrants who arrived in Mexico in 1902, and his delegation met Lebanon's premier Saad Hariri at his residence in downtown Beirut. He arrived in Beirut Thursday and also held talks with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman. The Forbes list, released Wednesday, valued Slim's fortune at 53.5 billion dollars, 500 million dollars ahead of long-time list topper Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. Legendary investor Warren Buffet was third with 47 billion dollars. Slim, 70, owns the telecommunications company Telefonos de Mexico (Telmex) and the mobile phone operator America Movil, the department store firm Grupo Sanborns and many other companies brought together into the Carso Group, which employs around 210,000 people in Mexico. Although he has now left the management of most of his companies in the hands of his children, Slim remains active in strategy for business expansion, philanthropy, construction of roads and buildings, among other ventures. -DPA

Palestine

Fatah and Hamas Trade Accusations Over Jerusalem Clashes

Friday March 19, 2010IMEMC & Agencies The rival Fatah and Hamas movements have returned to trading accusations, this time over the Israeli violations in Jerusalem and its holy sites. The Hamas-led Palestinian government in Gaza accused Fatah in the West Bank, of preventing the Palestinians from protesting against the Israeli attacks in Jerusalem. In return, Fatah said that Hamas routinely abuses the situation in Jerusalem, and this time "it went far enough to use the holy sites in Jerusalem as a pretext to attack Fatah". Dr. Fayiz Abu Aita, spokesperson for Fatah, said that the struggle against the occupation and against its violations in Jerusalem and its Arab holy sites should not be used by Hamas as a pretext to attack Fatah or a motive for internal clashes. Meanwhile, Taher al-Nunu, spokesperson of the Hamas-led government in Gaza, said that the Fatah-led government in the West Bank is preventing the residents from protesting against the

Israeli violations. Al-Nunu claimed that Fatah's security forces are opening fire at the residents, and using excessive force in order to disperse them. He added that Fatah did the same thing in preventing the residents from protesting during the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip last year. Al-Nunu said that such conduct prove collaboration with Israel and its violations against the Palestinians and their holy sites. Abu Aita responded, stating that Fatah supports the popular resistance in Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, and added that Hamas always tries to use clashes with Israel as a motive to clash with Fatah.

Jailed Fateh Leader Gets PHD

Wednesday March 17, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies Imprisoned Fateh leader, Marwan Barghouthi, serving five consecutive life terms in Israeli prisons, obtained his PHD degree in Political Science. Israel kidnapped the Palestinian official, an elected legislator, and accused him of forming the Al Aqsa Brigades, the armed wing of Fateh, and held him responsible for the death of several Israelis. Barghouthi, 50, joined the University of Cairo and the Arab Academy for Research and Studies in 1999, just three years before Israel arrested him. His thesis "The Legislative and Political Performance of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and the Contribution of the PLC to the Democratic Process in Palestine in the period between 1996 and 2008. His theses, 341 pages, will be presented to the Dead of the Arab Academy for Research and Studies, Ahmad Yousef. The Jerusalem Post reported that Barghouthi managed to obtain the needed books and materials authorized by the Israeli Authorities. It is worth mentioning that in 1980, Barghouthi managed to obtain his high school certificate while he was imprisoned by Israel. After completing school and being released Barghouthi obtained his B.A degree and masters from the Bir Zeit University near Ramallah. The Fateh leader was brought in front of an Israeli court and was convicted on May 20, 2004. Israel claims that Barghouthi organized attacks that led to the death of 21 Israelis. On June 6, 2004, he was sentenced to five life-terms and 40 years. Barghouthi is a Palestinian leader who enjoys wide respect and support from the Palestinian people regardless of their political affiliation. He is seen as a symbol for resistance, determination and steadfastness.

U.S. envoy George Mitchell cancels his visit to Israel amidst U.S-Israeli diplomatic crisis

Tuesday March 16, 2010 - IMEMC News & Agencies The U.S Embassy in Tel Aviv informed Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu that U.S. special peace envoy George Mitchell had cancel his visit to the region. Mitchell was planning to meet Israeli officials to get their response about the government policy on the issue of settlements. Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu announced on Monday that settlement construction will continue in Jerusalem. Political analysts say the trip was canceled due to growing anger by the Obama administration on Israeli continued settlement construction in East Jerusalem. The crises began last week when Israel announced 50, 000 new settlers homes to built in East Jerusalem. The new settlement construction announcement came during a visit by the U.S vice president, Joe Biden, to the region last week in an attempt to wrap up the latest diplomatic efforts to jumpstart stalled Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. The Palestinian Authority reaffirmed its position that there will be no direct or indirect talks with Israel as long as settlement construction continues. Currently, there are 500,000 Israeli settlers living in West Bank settlements, with 20,000 of those living in Jerusalem settlements.

Under international law all Israeli settlements in the West Bank including Jerusalem are illegal.