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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
Fertile Crescent
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Summary

Political front

US criticism of its detention of scores of protesters who rallied earlier this week in Cairo demanding constitutional reforms to allow more open elections. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said in a statement released that Egyptian elections are an internal matter. "The (US) remarks, without clear justification, shifted from talking about the arrests to other internal political Egyptian issue in an unfamiliar pattern which is not accepted by Egypt," said Zaki. He was referring to Washington concerns expressed Wednesday by State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley over the arrests.

The Muslim Brotherhood does not want to rule Egypt at the moment and does not have any political agenda regarding any presidential candidate," said the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide, Mohamed Badae', on Dream TV's "Al-Ashera Masa'an". This was Badae's first television interview since his election as the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide, their highest authority, last January. He continued saying that the Muslim Brotherhood will choose the best presidential candidate to support based

on his electoral program. Badea' also said that the largest opposition group is not opposed to anyone who wants to run for president, including the President's son, Gamal Mubarak.

An emerging opposition leader in Egypt and former head of the UN's nuclear watchdog agency has called for a boycott of the upcoming elections, an Egyptian activist said Monday. Mohamed ElBaradei could not be reached for comment but his call would be the toughest challenge he has yet to issue to Mubarak's regime since he started his campaign for political reform last month.

Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit refuted allegations that there was any Egyptian involvement in the arrest and subsequent deportation of supporters of Mohamed ElBaradei in Kuwait. Aboul Gheit said these allegations were "refused, unacceptable and irresponsible." He added that the Egyptian embassy in Kuwait was following up the matter with Kuwaiti authorities. Thirty-three Egyptians residing in Kuwait were arrested on April 8 and 9 for wanting to form a branch of the National Coalition for Change, the group headed by former IAEA chief ElBaradei to call for constitutional change in Egypt. Twenty-one were later deported and eight remain in detention in Kuwait.

Geo strategic front

Egypt closed the Rafah border crossing a day after Israel issued an alert to its citizens in Sinai requesting them to return immediately. However, later on in the day it reopened the crossing to wounded Palestinians and stated that it would remain open until Thursday as had been previously scheduled. Head of the National Coalition for Change Mohamed ElBaradei criticized the building of a steel barrier beneath the border between Egypt and Gaza, saying it has harmed Egypt's reputation.

Economic front

After several days of meetings, the US-Egypt Business Leaders Forum, along with Minister of Trade Rachid Mohamed Rachid and US Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey, signed an agreement to support a new entrepreneurship program to benefit both Egypt and the US. Taher Helmy, co-chairman of the Business Leaders Forum and partner in the Helmy, Hamza and Partners/Baker and McKenzie international law firm, explained, "We decided to establish a fund to inject our own money from the private sector on both the US and Egypt side".

Egypt's finance minister said he was ready to consider a new cigarette tax to boost healthcare spending for low income groups, which is being discussed in parliament. Egypt is overhauling healthcare and insurance to improve services for its 78 million people, of which about 20 percent live on less than \$1 a day, according to the United Nations.

A WIDELY popular Islamic website has been, until very recently, an undisputed success story. IslamOnline arrived at a time that millions of Muslims needed a common platform and a unifying outlet. Here was a website that neither shunned nor alienated. Its influence was upbeat and positive, rather than destructive or divisive. While it wasn't an apologetic outlet, it reached out to patiently and progressively present Islam and Muslim issues to the world. These were understood and communicated by hundreds of scholars and qualified journalists, who toiled day and night from their Cairo offices. Then something happened to abruptly bring the noble mission to an end.

Employees at a popular Cairo-based Islamic website have vowed to continue their strike and launch a fundraiser to build a new site "to promote moderate Islam" after Qatar

installed an alleged conservative new board to run the 10-year-old IslamOnline. "We will launch a worldwide initiative to set up a new website to promote moderate Islam through an international contribution," the 340 employees, who have been on strike since March 15, said in a statement. "We are determined to continue our strike until we get our financial entitlements and to protect the intellectual mission for which IslamOnline was set up in 1999," they added in a statement, a copy of which was obtained by Gulf News.

Iraq

Iraq's latest elections have proved that the future scenarios are still open for all possibilities. This means that both the Nouri al-Maliki government and the seven-year occupation have failed to put democracy on the right path in Iraq. The internal and regional players in Iraq have different, conflicting agendas. The Maliki bloc, the State of Justice and Law, talked about fraud while international observers said that the election process conformed with the international standards. They were the first who went to Tehran to get Iranian support after they lost marginally against their rivals the Iraqiya bloc of Iyad Allawi. The Sadrists are another group that is loyal to Iran. Their leader has just fled the country and lives in Tehran, but leads about 6,000 armed troops in the south from the Persian capital. Both al-Maliki and Sadrists blocs want to impose a Shi'ite domination of the government. This puts the country on the verge of another chaos and civil war.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's postelection strategy suggests he is prepared for a long and bitter fight to hold on to power, even if it alienates the country's Sunni community and risks new sectarian warfare. Premier-elect Iyad Allawi is surrounded by security and cameras in Baghdad. The Iraqi leader is trying all sorts of legal maneuvers to deny victory to his chief opponent, former prime minister Ayad Allawi, whose secular, nationalist bloc won the most parliamentary seats in the March 7 elections and presumably the right to try to form a new government. Even if al-Maliki sticks with nominally legal measures, he risks serious damage to all the efforts to ease sectarian tensions which had begun to bear fruit three years after the US. troop surge. A resurgence of major violence would complicate US. plans to withdraw all its forces from Iraq by the end of next year.

An electoral review panel has ordered a recount of ballots cast in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, during the March 7 general election, an official has said. Hamdiya al-Husseini, Iraq's electoral commissioner, said a manual recount would begin immediately a move that could have an impact on who becomes the country's next prime minister.

Al-Jaafari, who was Iraq's prime minister in 2005-2006, won 24% of the Sadrists' referendum [EPA] Followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, an influential Shia Muslim leader of Iraq, have chosen Ibrahim al-Jaafari as their preferred candidate to become the country's next prime minister. Results from last week's referendum that the Sadrists held showed al-Jaafari, a former prime minister, ahead of other front runners like Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent PM, and Iyad Allawi, another ex-premier. According to results obtained by Al Jazeera, al-Jaafari won 24 per cent of the vote, while al-Maliki got 10 per cent and Allawi secured nine per cent. Jafaar al-Sadr,

Iran has urged leaders in neighboring Iraq to form a national unity government that includes Sunni Muslims. Iranian Ambassador Hassan Kazemi Qomi said the Iraqiya coalition, which includes Sunnis and Shi'ites and won the largest share of seats in last

month's parliamentary election, would hold discussions in Tehran in the coming days. Iraqi political leaders have been in talks to form a government since the inconclusive election. Shi'ite Iran has in the past advocated a Shi'ite-dominated government. "We support and encourage the participation of all the parties, but this is an internal Iraqi thing. It is only consulting [with Iraqiya], no more," Qomi told a news conference in Baghdad. "We are open to all parties."

It has been more than a month since Iraqiya, the secularist party, won the most cabinet seats in Iraq's national elections, defeating Shia religious parties who have dominated the political landscape over the last four years. But no parties have gained enough seats to solely rule over the country, which makes a national alliance a must for an effective government to exist. However, the religious parties and Iraqiya have failed to form an alliance due to major disagreements - including who should acquire the post of prime minister. And now concerns are rising among the public over whether key leaders may be left out of the government formation and the serious instability it could bring about.

Geo strategic front

Lebanon

Political front

Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun: "On the occasion of April 13, the date of the downfall of Lebanese society in all its institutions, we cannot rebuild the society with the same mentality that governed the past phase because that is why Lebanon always stumbles again, as no one puts the country's interests [first] but rather his own."

Former Premier Najib Mikati: "We believe the overwhelming majority of Lebanese reject a return to the logic of war and internal division, and have truly begun to take a path of real national cohesion, but ending the war doesn't come with a ceasefire, or by forgetting, but by learning the lessons of the past. We hope that the political sides in conflict have learned the lessons from the recent past and all of the painful episodes of the history of the Civil War."

Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun announced that the Beirut district would witness an electoral battle in the upcoming municipal elections, dismissing recent media reports regarding a potential agreement with the Future Movement.

MP Michel Pharaon told reporters following the meeting that the "door remained open to Contradictory statements by the parliamentary minority emerged over the weekend with regard to leaking the deliberations of National Dialogue discussions, as Hizbullah officials reiterated their demand to refrain from debating the national defense strategy in the media.

the Orthodox and Catholic Christians will celebrate the Annunciation, the day when Archangel Gabriel heralded the Holy Virgin Mary that she was chosen to be the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Annunciation is celebrated on March 25 every year, nine months before Christmas. The Christian East celebrates the holiday since 550, while the Catholic Church introduced the celebration in the 7th century. The Annunciation marks the actual incarnation of Jesus Christ – the moment that Jesus was conceived and that the Son of God became the son of the Virgin. *The festival celebrates two things:* namely God's action in entering the human world as Jesus in order to save humanity, and the humanity's willing acceptance of God's action in Mary's freely given acceptance of the task of being the Mother of God.

Detailed news

Egypt

Political front

Egypt slams US criticism over detaining protesters

Associated Press Egypt has dismissed US criticism of its detention of scores of protesters who rallied earlier this week in Cairo demanding constitutional reforms to allow more open elections. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said in a statement released late Thursday that Egyptian elections are an internal matter. "The (US) remarks, without clear justification, shifted from talking about the arrests to other internal political Egyptian issue in an unfamiliar pattern which is not accepted by Egypt," said Zaki. He was referring to Washington concerns expressed Wednesday by State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley over the arrests. In his remarks, Crowley called on Egypt to allow its people to determine who will run and win the country's upcoming elections. Tens of protesters were arrested when police beat the demonstrators and violently broke up Tuesday's gathering. The detained were released the following day without any official explanation. Zaki said that "Egyptians don't accept that foreign governments speak on their behalf." The Egyptian government is very sensitive about foreign reports about opposition demands for reforms to allow an open presidential contest in the polling next year. Egypt's leading Al-Ahram newspaper carried Zaki's statement splashed across the front page of its evening edition Friday, under a bold red headline: "Egypt tells America in an urgent message: Stay where you are." Al-Ahram also published Friday interviews with several opposition lawmakers and two university professors, all denouncing what is described as US interference in Egypt's internal affairs. Tuesday's protest was organized by the April 6 Youth Movement and officials had said that the protest was banned and illegal. New York-based Human Rights Watch also voiced its concern over the crackdown and condemned the "lawless brutality" with which police dispersed the demonstrators. Egypt has been under emergency law, which severely restricts civil rights, for 29 years during the rule of President Hosni Mubarak, who will stand for re-election in 2011. The unofficial candidacy of former UN nuclear watchdog chief and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohammed ElBaradei has garnered much national support and media attention worldwide.

After warning, hundreds of Israelis flee Sinai

Agencies April 14, 2010 : Hundreds of Israeli travelers returned home after Israel warned its citizens to urgently leave Egypt's Sinai Peninsula because of a kidnapping alert, police said Wednesday. In the unusually strong wording late Tuesday, Israel's anti-terror office called on all Israelis in Sinai "to leave immediately and return home," and cited "concrete evidence of an expected terrorist attempt to kidnap Israelis in Sinai." The director of the office suggested that fighters in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip were involved in the alleged kidnap plot. The peninsula, within driving distance of Israel, was once an extremely popular vacation destination for Israelis because of its inexpensive seaside resorts, nestled at the foot of desert mountains. A string of deadly suicide bombings in 2004 at several vacation spots popular with Israelis — including the Taba Hilton Hotel just across the Israeli border — has led many Israelis to shun the Sinai, though the area still remains relatively popular. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said about 650 Israelis were in

Sinai when the warning was issued Tuesday — about half the number the counterterrorism office initially presented. By midmorning Wednesday, some 430 had left, Rosenfeld said. The commander of the anti-terror office, Brig. Gen. Nitzan Nuriel, said Tuesday that "it is very possible that at this moment, there is a terror cell that has the intention and has a plan in operation to kidnap an Israeli and bring him to Gaza." Palestinian fighters in Gaza have been holding an Israeli soldier captive for more than three years. Israeli military radio reported that the warning was issued following an unconfirmed rumor about the kidnapping of an Israeli. Israel already issued a general warning to its citizens in February about the dangers of travel over the next few months to the Red Sea resort area which is a major draw. But despite the travel advice, some 20,000 Israeli tourists still holidayed in the Sinai over the Jewish Passover holiday in late March and early April. The anti-terrorism unit cited "threats from Hezbollah and Iran." A senior Egyptian security official contacted by AFP said the interior ministry was looking into the Israeli travel warning. But other officials played it down, saying that it was based on "rumors" and that there was no credible intelligence suggesting tourists were under threat. In addition to the 2004 suicide bombings, which killed dozens, bombers have also struck the Sinai resort towns of Sharm El-Sheikh in 2005 and Dahab in 2006, killing dozens more. Disgruntled Bedouin influenced by extremist groups were implicated in the Sharm and Dahab attacks. —Agencies

No Brotherhood candidate for presidency, says supreme guide

Daily News Egypt April 15, 2010 "The Muslim Brotherhood does not want to rule Egypt at the moment and does not have any political agenda regarding any presidential candidate," said the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide, Mohamed Badae', on Dream TV's "Al-Ashera Masa'an" Wednesday. This was Badae's first television interview since his election as the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide, their highest authority, last January. He continued saying that the Muslim Brotherhood will choose the best presidential candidate to support based on his electoral program. Badae' also said that the largest opposition group is not opposed to anyone who wants to run for president, including the President's son, Gamal Mubarak. "If he is going to present a new agenda vowing reform to the people then we don't mind him running for president," he said. On the other hand, Badae' suggested that President Mubarak needs to resign from his post as head of the National Democratic Party and become "a president for all Egyptians." As for Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Badae' remained ambiguous regarding whether the group is supporting him or not. "ElBaradei has not officially announced that he is running for presidency, however the Muslim Brotherhood completely agrees with him on his call for fair and free elections [which can be done through] a number of constitutional amendments and cancelling the emergency law," he explained. Badae' asserted that the authorities' hostility seems to be mostly targeted at members of the Muslim Brotherhood through the emergency law, which has been in place for nearly 30 years. Thus, the call for cancelling emergency law is currently one of the group's main objectives. He called on all political powers in Egypt to stand together in the face of this "dangerous state" referring to the continued implementation of the emergency law. A continued crackdown by security forces on the Brotherhood, with hundreds detained since the beginning of the year including key figures, has been explained by political analysts as a way to contain their influence in a

year of parliamentary elections. Badea' said that the names of all the Muslim Brotherhood's candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections will be announced shortly before the elections take place.

The show's host inquired about the status of the Muslim Brotherhood internally, a situation which she described as "vague and ambiguous." Badea's responded by saying that differences in opinion was only natural and that there are no rifts within the group. During the show, Badea' also discussed the April 6 Youth Movement and the recent protests. "The Muslim Brotherhood students supported the movement by participating, in addition MB MPs submitted investigation requests at the People's Assembly regarding the way the activists were treated," he said. The supreme guide said that they plan on collaborating with other opposition parties and groups, which shows their willingness to cooperate with anyone calling for reform, adding that "the MB extended their hands to all groups in an effort to strengthen the opposition."

ElBaradei urges election boycott, says activist

An emerging opposition leader in Egypt and former head of the UN's nuclear watchdog agency has called for a boycott of the upcoming elections, an Egyptian activist said Monday. Mohamed ElBaradei could not be reached for comment but his call would be the toughest challenge he has yet to issue to Mubarak's regime since he started his campaign for political reform last month. Ibrahim Nawar, a senior member of the opposition National Front Party, said ElBaradei made his remarks during a meeting with party members Monday to discuss political strategy. Nawar said ElBaradei called for the boycott to "deprive" President Hosni Mubarak's regime of legitimacy. "Let them be exposed naked before the whole world," Nawar quoted ElBaradei as saying. Egypt will have a parliamentary election this fall and a presidential poll next year. However, registered opposition parties, which receive considerable government funding are not expected to head ElBaradei's call. The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest Islamic opposition movement is also expected to participate. A Nobel laureate, ElBaradei has seen a wave of support from reformists who see him as a potential challenger to Mubarak. Rather than actually run for president, ElBaradei has turned his focus to promoting electoral reforms and constitutional amendments that would allow a credible rival candidate to run in next year's presidential election. He has been meeting with various political groups after nearly three decades abroad to urge them for action. Over 100,000 people have joined a Facebook group supporting his candidacy. Existing restrictions make it practically impossible for independents or candidates from new parties to run, meaning that ElBaradei's chances would be dim without long-sought constitutional amendments. Egypt has been under emergency law, which severely restricts civil rights, for 29 years during the rule of Mubarak, who is rumored to stand for re-election in 2011. -AP

FM denies Egypt involvement in arrest of ElBaradei supporters in Kuwait

Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit refuted allegations that there was any Egyptian involvement in the arrest and subsequent deportation of supporters of Mohamed ElBaradei in Kuwait. Sunday before heading to Washington to attend a nuclear summit. Aboul Gheit said these allegations were "refused, unacceptable and irresponsible." He

added that the Egyptian embassy in Kuwait was following up the matter with Kuwaiti authorities. Thirty-three Egyptians residing in Kuwait were arrested on April 8 and 9 for wanting to form a branch of the National Coalition for Change, the group headed by former IAEA chief ElBaradei to call for constitutional change in Egypt. Twenty-one were later deported and eight remain in detention in Kuwait. Kuwaiti Ambassador to Cairo Rashid Al-Hamad said that the Egyptians were deported because they had broken Kuwaiti law by gathering without a permit, which is a law that applies to both Kuwaitis and expatriates. However, it is Article 12 of Kuwait's 1979 law regarding public gatherings that prevents non-citizens from amassing for protests or any form of public gathering. The Kuwaiti Interior Ministry released a press statement in which it requested that expats conform to the laws of the country, which prohibits any political gatherings or protests that may harm Kuwait's relations with another country. However, Al-Shorouk newspaper published a report Monday that claimed that the arrests were carried out in coordination with Egypt, according to unnamed Kuwaiti and Egyptian officials quoted in the article. The newspaper claimed that the Egyptian embassy in Kuwait had been notified of the arrests beforehand and that no objections were made. A Kuwaiti official told the paper that although the gathering was against the law, Kuwait also "has a lot of respect and appreciation for President Hosni Mubarak." Human Rights Watch called on Kuwaiti authorities to rescind the detentions and deportations, with its Middle East and North Africa director Sarah Leah Whitson saying, "Kuwait is enabling Egypt's repression by harassing ElBaradei supporters ... Kuwait only selectively enforces its restrictions on freedom of assembly, which in any event violates a basic human right to freely assemble and express views."

Geo strategic front

Egypt briefly closes Rafah border over fears of a terrorist threat

Daily News Egypt April 14, 2010: Egypt closed the Rafah border crossing Wednesday a day after Israel issued an alert to its citizens in Sinai requesting them to return immediately. However, later on in the day it reopened the crossing to wounded Palestinians and stated that it would remain open until Thursday as had been previously scheduled. Israel had issued an advisory to Israeli tourists warning of a possible terrorist attack in Sinai and potential kidnapping of Israeli tourists. It was also reported that on Wednesday Hamas had ordered the closure of the smuggling tunnels beneath the Egypt-Gaza border. A source near the border told Daily News Egypt, "There is cooperation between Hamas and Egyptian security forces; there is a possibility that there might be worries about a different radical group that's unaffiliated with Hamas." An Israeli police spokesman told AFP that there was 650 Israeli tourists in Sinai, 430 of which returned after the Israeli government issued the alert. At the Mubarak Peace Bridge that leads into North Sinai, body searches were being conducted at the checkpoints for all those entering. Although officially closed, Egypt usually opens the Rafah crossing on Wednesdays and Thursdays to allow Palestinians seeking treatment to enter Egypt and those who have finished their medical treatment to return to Gaza. Egypt did not give a reason for the initial closure of the crossing but it seems related to the security alert issued by Israel. What is unclear is why would Hamas order the closure of the tunnels on the same day. Another source in the area told Daily News Egypt that up until Tuesday night the tunnels were still working. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that Hamas

closed the tunnels after “an urgent request from Egyptian security services following warnings of planned terror attacks in the Sinai Peninsula.” The Israeli alert had warned that there were plans by a terrorist cell to kidnap an Israeli in Sinai and transport him into Gaza via one of the tunnels, hence the closure of the tunnels and the crossing. A medical shipment organized by the Arab Doctors Union was to enter Gaza Wednesday but was prevented after the closure of the crossing.

ElBaradei criticizes underground Gaza barrier

Daily News Egypt Head of the National Coalition for Change Mohamed ElBaradei criticized the building of a steel barrier beneath the border between Egypt and Gaza, saying it has harmed Egypt’s reputation. In an interview with the Palestine Information Center Monday, the former IAEA chief said that the building of the underground wall is perceived as Egyptian complicity in the Israeli siege of Gaza, in place since Hamas took over the territory in June 2007. ElBaradei said that the best solution for the Gaza border was the closure of the underground tunnels used for smuggling goods into the impoverished strip, and opening the Rafah crossing permanently, not intermittently as Egypt has done over the past three years. He also called for a free trade zone to be put in place in Rafah where Palestinians could go buy goods freely before returning to Gaza. Work on the underground barrier has intensified in recent weeks as it nears areas renowned for the number of smuggling tunnels. Egypt began building the underground barrier earlier this year, but at first refused to confirm that it was doing so. Later, it refused to say that it was a wall, but rather an extension of the barbed wire fence running across the border over ground. ElBaradei also spoke of the Palestinian issue in general during the interview, claiming that it was at its lowest ebb. He criticized Israel for refusing to move forward in the peace process, claiming that it had become a joke. He also said that Israel only understands the language of force, and that the Arabs should back their peace proposals with the language of force and defiance. “As is witnessed in the Palestine cause,” he said. ElBaradei has returned to Egypt after leaving his IAEA post to stir the political waters in his home country, hinting that he might consider running for president in the 2011 elections and calling for constitutional change. He has set up the National Coalition for Change with a number of opposition figures to call first and foremost for changes in the constitution, specifically the articles that govern the viability of presidential candidates. Secretary of Information at the ruling National Democratic Party Ali Eldin Hilal said in a lecture at Cairo University Monday that Egypt’s problems will not be solved with constitutional amendments and those calling for it did not “live in reality.” He said that Egypt’s future problems revolved around water poverty and a continued increase in the population level. Member of the National Coalition for Change George Ishaq told Daily News Egypt Monday in response to Hilal’s comments, “We want change because the current regime ruined our lives, they haven’t looked to the future for thirty years, are they going to start now?” “Hilal’s comments are wrong and if the amendments we are calling for aren’t made to ensure free and fair elections then nothing will change because they will not change,” he added.

Obama takes non-nuclear pledge to world leaders

President Barack Obama's pledge to one day rid the world of nuclear weapons runs up against global realities this week when representatives from 47 countries try to craft an agreement on keeping nuclear weapons out of terrorist hands. Sweeping or even bold new strategies were unlikely to emerge from the two-day gathering that begins Monday. But

Obama invited the swarm of world leaders as an important step to intensify global focus on one of the most serious nuclear proliferation threats: a world in which non-state actors — like the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization — obtain nuclear materials. "The single biggest threat to US security, both short-term, medium-term and long-term, would be the possibility of a terrorist organization obtaining a nuclear weapon. This is something that could change the security landscape in this country and around the world for years to come," Obama said as he conducted a series of bilateral meetings with world leaders Sunday. "We know that organizations like Al-Qaeda are in the process of trying to secure nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, and would have no compunction at using them," Obama said. The president has set a goal of ensuring all nuclear materials worldwide are secured from theft or diversion within four years. On the table, too, will be Iran's perceived attempts to build a nuclear weapon in violation of the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and North Korea's nuclear weapons stockpile and exports of nuclear materials and technology. "We want to get the world's attention focused where we think it needs to be with these continuing efforts by Al-Qaeda and others to get just enough nuclear material to cause terrible havoc, destruction and loss of life somewhere in the world," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said in an interview broadcast Sunday on ABC's "This Week." Clinton said the gathering would be the largest assembly of world leaders hosted by an American president since the 1945 San Francisco conference that founded the United Nations. Obama sought to set the tone in one-on-one meetings Sunday with the leaders of India and Pakistan — antagonistic, nuclear-armed neighbors — as well as South Africa and Kazakhstan, which have given up nuclear weapons programs. As the meetings ended, White House officials briefed reporters, paying special attention to Obama's session with Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Michael McFaul, Obama's senior adviser on Russia and the former Soviet Union, said the president praised Nazarbayev as "really one of the model leaders in the world. We could not have this summit without his presence." McFaul said Obama noted that Kazakhstan had benefited greatly on giving up its nuclear weapons when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. That act led to "greater security and economic prosperity." Obama said, according to McFaul, that Iran should take a lesson from Nazarbayev. Obama also spoke about Kazakhstan's shaky human rights record, a reminder to Nazarbayev that the United States was closely monitoring developments in that field even as it praises the country's stand on nonproliferation. As Obama met with South African President Jacob Zuma, Ben Rhodes, a National Security Council spokesman, said the South Africans too had set an example for their continent by giving up nuclear weapons. Rhodes said Obama expressed his belief that giving up such weapons "speaks to the benefits nations can find" in nonproliferation. Rhodes also announced that Obama would hold a previously unplanned sit-down with the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey is a key NATO ally, and relations have been difficult recently, particularly over Iran. Rhodes said there were additional "pressing issues," including normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. Obama opened Sunday's meetings with India's President Manmohan Singh. They covered "the range of issues," Rhodes said, including food security, poverty reduction, the war in Afghanistan and India's development assistance to the impoverished nation. Later, Obama smiled and shared a laugh with Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani. As reporters

entered the meeting room, Obama was telling Gilani, "we've made some progress since then." It was unclear what Obama was referring to.

Pakistan has a troubled history with the United States, and anti-American sentiment runs extraordinarily high among ordinary Pakistanis. US leaders go out of their way to assure Pakistan that the United States will not walk away from the improving relationship with Pakistan, and Congress has committed billions in new aid to the country. The United States needs Pakistan's help as it battles to wipe out the Al-Qaeda terrorist network's safe haven in the ungoverned tribal regions along its border with Afghanistan.

Iran and North Korea were not invited because they are viewed as violators of the nonproliferation agreement. Syria was left off the invitation list because the US believes Damascus also has nuclear ambitions. Israel, meanwhile, said last week that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would not attend the conference as planned. Insiders said he was worried Turkey and Egypt would use the summit to challenge him over his country's nuclear arsenal, which the Jewish state never has acknowledged. In Netanyahu's absence, Israel will be represented by Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor. Obama opens the conference Monday with a working dinner, and meets individually that day with the leaders of Jordan, Malaysia, Armenia and China. The sessions close Tuesday with a joint statement on efforts to prevent the transfer of nuclear materials and technology and to keep them locked up. The Washington conference is the fourth leg of Obama's campaign to rid the world of nuclear weapons, which have been used only by the United States to force a Japanese surrender in World War II. The high-flown goal, which the president admits will probably not be met in his lifetime, began a year ago in Prague when he laid out plans for significant nuclear reductions. In the meantime, he has approved a new nuclear policy for the United States, vowing last week to reduce America's nuclear arsenal, refrain from nuclear tests and not use nuclear weapons against countries that do not have them. North Korea and Iran were not included in that pledge because they do not cooperate with other countries on nonproliferation standards. That was Tuesday, and two days later, on the anniversary of the Prague speech, Obama flew back to Prague where he and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev signed a new START treaty that reduces each side's deployed nuclear arsenal to 1,550 weapons.

Egypt slams US criticism over detaining protesters

Egypt has dismissed US criticism of its detention of scores of protesters who rallied earlier this week in Cairo demanding constitutional reforms to allow more open elections. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said in a statement released late Thursday that Egyptian elections are an internal matter. "The (US) remarks, without clear justification, shifted from talking about the arrests to other internal political Egyptian issue in an unfamiliar pattern which is not accepted by Egypt," said Zaki. He was referring to Washington concerns expressed Wednesday by State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley over the arrests. In his remarks, Crowley called on Egypt to allow its people to determine who will run and win the country's upcoming elections. Tens of protesters were arrested when police beat the demonstrators and violently broke up Tuesday's gathering. The detained were released the following day without any official explanation. Zaki said that "Egyptians don't accept that foreign governments speak on their behalf." The Egyptian government is very sensitive about foreign reports about opposition

demands for reforms to allow an open presidential contest in the polling next year. Egypt's leading Al-Ahram newspaper carried Zaki's statement splashed across the front page of its evening edition Friday, under a bold red headline: "Egypt tells America in an urgent message: Stay where you are." Al-Ahram also published Friday interviews with several opposition lawmakers and two university professors, all denouncing what is described as US interference in Egypt's internal affairs. Tuesday's protest was organized by the April 6 Youth Movement and officials had said that the protest was banned and illegal. New York-based Human Rights Watch also voiced its concern over the crackdown and condemned the "lawless brutality" with which police dispersed the demonstrators. Egypt has been under emergency law, which severely restricts civil rights, for 29 years during the rule of President Hosni Mubarak, who will stand for re-election in 2011. The unofficial candidacy of former UN nuclear watchdog chief and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohammed ElBaradei has garnered much national support and media attention worldwide.

Economic front

US-Egypt Business Leaders Forum launch entrepreneurship program

After several days of meetings, the US-Egypt Business Leaders Forum, along with Minister of Trade Rachid Mohamed Rachid and US Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey, signed an agreement to support a new entrepreneurship program to benefit both Egypt and the US. Taher Helmy, co-chairman of the Business Leaders Forum and partner in the Helmy, Hamza and Partners/Baker and McKenzie international law firm, explained, "We decided to establish a fund to inject our own money from the private sector on both the US and Egypt side". He added that the Forum had sought and gained support from both governments for the entrepreneurship program, in keeping with both President Barack Obama and President Hosni Mubarak's commitment to strengthening economic growth. The program will provide monetary and network support for entrepreneurs, Helmy explained, as well as training to "develop Egypt's human capital ... to be globally competitive ... [and] active members of a market economy". Training will focus on business start-up and management practices, as well as general skill development. Helmy stated that while identifying, training and supporting entrepreneurs represents the primary goal of the program, it considers education and vocational training a necessary component of the process. He mentioned that the fund will also provide scholarships for Egyptians to come to the US and for Americans to come to Egypt. The US Egypt Business Leaders Forum — the latest manifestation of a bilateral private sector partnership that has existed under various titles since the Clinton administration — was signed into its current manifestation last May. During Obama's subsequent visit to Cairo in June, the US president spoke of an entrepreneurship summit for Muslim majority countries (MMCs), as well as enhancing efforts to support economic growth and opportunity for the burgeoning youth in countries such as Egypt. The Entrepreneurship Summit, to which Egypt will bring the largest national delegation as one of the "pilot projects" receiving this entrepreneurial support, will be held in Washington DC on April 26-27. Indonesia, the other country chosen as a pilot for entrepreneurial support initiatives, will host President Obama in June for a follow-up speech to his Cairo address. While extolling the American entrepreneurial spirit that launched such legends as Microsoft and Boeing, Helmy pointed out that Egypt has already demonstrated

significant success in the areas of telecom, real estate, food production and tourism. “We have succeeded in economic reform over the past 10 years, especially in the past six years [since the establishment of the ‘business-friendly cabinet’ that includes Minister Rachid],” Helmy said, confidently affirming Egypt’s sometimes controversial efforts to reform its economic and financial structure. He warned however, that reforms cannot generate sustainable economic benefit if the population is ill-equipped to take advantage of opportunity. Helmy credited the efforts of Minister Rachid in promoting the Forum’s past efforts for trade and reform, as well as his support for this latest initiative. US Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey also acknowledged the determination of Minister Rachid to strengthen economic ties with the US. She laughed, “Within hours of the inauguration [of President Obama], Rachid told me, ‘We’ve got to get a trade dialogue going’. Although our governments enjoy an open dialogue, it is a dialogue assisted by input from the private sector.” G. Steven Farris, CEO of the Apache Corporation, a petroleum company and the largest American investor in Egypt, as well as the co-chairperson of the US-Egypt Business Leaders Forum, emphasized the more traditional role of the Forum: to promote investment and bilateral trade. While Helmy politely congratulated the US for long providing an environment conducive to entrepreneurial activity and success, Farris mentioned the domestic and economic difficulties currently concerning the US, while acknowledging Egypt’s concerted efforts at economic reform. “There is a lot of work to do in the US: healthcare, climate change, economic ... Those kind of reforms are constant. But Egypt has done an outstanding job to open up markets and increase trade,” he said, complimenting Minister Rachid on successfully doubling Egypt’s exports to the US in the preceding five years. “Your Minister of Trade has set a lofty goal [to again double exports to the US], and the US has a similar goal.” His comment that, “This is the start of real friendship between the US and Egypt on the business side” highlighted the alteration of a relationship which previously consisted more of aid and military funding flowing into Egypt. Egypt remains the largest recipient of US Foreign Aid after Israel. Minister Rachid deflected questions of how the changing relationship between the US and Egypt would affect aid monies to Egypt, saying that USAID did not come under the scope of the Forum. Helmy responded to a question on agribusiness, citing Egypt’s urgent need for better water management and the agricultural technologies available in the US, hinting at greater opportunities for Egypt to gain access to such technology. Farris answered a question on the US sharing nuclear energy technology, corroborating the need for nuclear energy while reaffirming the primacy of petroleum as “the fuel of the future”. He spoke admiringly of Egypt’s wind power potential.

Egypt mulls cigarette tax to boost health budget

Egypt's finance minister said on Monday he was ready to consider a new cigarette tax to boost healthcare spending for low income groups, which is being discussed in parliament. Egypt is overhauling healthcare and insurance to improve services for its 78 million people, of which about 20 percent live on less than \$1 a day, according to the United Nations. "We (the Finance Ministry) haven't discussed it so far," Youssef Boutros-Ghali told Reuters by telephone, adding that he was ready to discuss a cigarette tax if parliament sought it. He said parliament wanted to add LE1 billion (\$181 million) for low-income groups to spending already earmarked in a draft health insurance law. One company, Eastern Company, has a monopoly on cigarette production and sales in Egypt.

Investment bank Beltone Financial said in a research note the tax would lead to a rise in prices without necessarily affecting companies' profits, unless the companies raise the cigarette prices by more than the tax. "The decision would have a negative impact on inflation, however, with tobacco constituting 2.6 percent of the urban consumer price index, leading to a one-off rise in inflation," the note said. Core inflation was at 7.04 percent in the year to March. The daily Al-Masry Al-Youm on Monday cited Health Minister Hatem El-Gabaly as saying the tax proposal would be referred to the Cabinet, which could decide on it within weeks. The state health insurance authority is also looking to raise student subscriptions in the medical insurance system to LE 8 from the LE 4 in the draft bill, the paper said. "Raising student subscriptions from LE 4 to LE 8 will generate annual revenues of LE 70 million, while taxes on cigarettes will raise around LE 700 million," Al-Masry Al-Youm quoted the health minister as saying. The 20 percent of the population that has no fixed income and another 8 million government employees will be exempt from paying health insurance contributions, Hamdy El-Sayed, head of the parliament's health committee, told Reuters. "That is why the Finance Ministry has a problem, as it will pay a lot of money to provide them with the service," he said. "And that is why we are suggesting resources to help the government establish the needed funding for the project." "We are asking the government to force new taxes on cement and cigarettes to be able to fund our project, which is very important to the solidarity of the society," El-Sayed added. Al-Shorouk newspaper quoted El-Gabaly as saying last week that the government should raise funds for public health expenditures from polluting industries such as tobacco and cement. –Additional reporting by Patrick Werr and Yasmine Saleh

Egypt says Nile sharing meeting fails

Egypt's state news agency reported Tuesday that 10 African nations have failed to conclude a long delayed new agreement for sharing water from the Nile and will call for closer cooperation instead. The Nile basin nations have failed for years now to agree on the Nile River Cooperative Framework Agreement to administer the longest river in the world, which would reduce Egypt's share of the Nile water. Egypt has categorically refused to sign the agreement. Ugandan Minister of Water and Environment Maria Mutagamba, in her opening speech at the meeting in the Sinai resort of Sharm Al-Sheikh called on her counterparts to sign the agreement without further delay. Ahead of the discussions, however, Egyptian Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation Mohamed Nasreddin Allam insisted that Egypt would maintain its share of 55.5 billion cubic meters of water from the river — more than half of the Nile's flow. Egypt also wants veto power over any new irrigation projects undertaken by the other nine riparian states. The Sub-Saharan African states have rejected the clause and called for the signing of the agreement. Egypt's claim to Nile water is based on a 1929 agreement between Egypt and Great Britain on behalf of Britain's colonies which gave Egypt the right to most of the more than 100 billion cubic meters of water that reaches the downstream countries annually. Egypt, a country of some 80 million people says if Egypt's annual share of Nile water remains at 55.5 billion cubic meters, per capita water availability will stand at around 630 cubic meters in 2025, compared with 1,213 in 1990. The agreement lays down principles of cooperative water resources management. If signed, the treaty would pave the way for the establishment of a permanent Nile River Basin Commission. In addition to Egypt the group includes Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda,

Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, which are calling for new allocations of Nile water to reflect their burgeoning populations and industrial capacity.

Social front

Mubarak accepts Azhar Sheikh's resignation from NDP

On Sunday, President Hosni Mubarak approved the resignation of Al-Azhar's Grand Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb from the National Democratic Party's influential policies committee. In an unexpected move, El-Tayeb announced on March 26 that he will resign from his NDP post pending presidential approval. This decision contradicts a statement made by the Grand Sheikh on his first day in office when he denied any "contradiction whatsoever between [his] position as Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar and membership in the National Democratic Party." El-Tayeb's attitude had spurred harsh criticism from both media and society, seeing his political engagement as a threat to the independence of his religious office. Al-Dostour newspaper reported that El-Tayeb's resignation was a response to a request within the NDP, and that the resignation was only delayed because of President Mubarak's trip to Germany for surgery. However, Sheikh Mahmoud Mogahed, member of the PA's religious committee, told Daily News Egypt that, "the reason behind the resignation is the public demand, the people want a neutral Grand Sheikh." He further added: "I support this decision." The position of the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar was created in the 17th century by the Ottomans. In 1961, Gamal Abdel Nasser enacted a law stipulating that the the government would select the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar. This decision partly undermined the autonomy of the Grand Sheikh, which was previously selected by a committee of Al-Azhar scholars.

Islam online crisis

Eloquent IslamOnline voice must not fail

A WIDELY popular Islamic website has been, until very recently, an undisputed success story. IslamOnline arrived at a time that millions of Muslims needed a common platform and a unifying outlet. Here was a website that neither shunned nor alienated. Its influence was upbeat and positive, rather than destructive or divisive. While it wasn't an apologetic outlet, it reached out to patiently and progressively present Islam and Muslim issues to the world. These were understood and communicated by hundreds of scholars and qualified journalists, who toiled day and night from their Cairo offices. Then something happened to abruptly bring the noble mission to an end. The success story suddenly became a terrible nightmare for hundreds of IslamOnline's principled employees. The website (IslamOnline.net) remained online, but it was barely updated. Instead, videos were circulated on youtube, showing tired-looking IslamOnline staff chanting in the lobby of their building in Cairo. They were demanding the return of their editorial freedom and rights. They were calling for justice. These bright journalists, some of the finest in the region, should have been sitting behind their computers screens writing, editing and managing "live dialogues" between inquisitive readers and learned scholars. Instead they were seated on the floor with signs and banners, shouting in coarse voices. **Something had gone horribly wrong.** Hadeel al-Shalchi tried to explain in a recent Associated Press report: "The Qatari government has forced out the moderate leadership of a popular Islamic website and plans to reshape it into a more religiously conservative

outlet, former employees of the site said." According to the AP report, "The site was thrown into turmoil when the owners attempted to change its approach, prompting 350 of its workers in Cairo to go on strike. Management in Doha then cut off their access to the site and have been updating it with news articles but not the diverse content IslamOnline is known for, said the former employees."IslamOnline is funded by al-Balagh, a Doha-based company. Al-Balagh was headed by well-respected Sheik Youssef al-Qaradawi, a most sensible and judicious religious authority. He is known, and much liked, for his progressive views on Islam. Al-Qaradawi is also very popular among Muslims around the world, not least because of his daring political views, his strong anti-war, pro-resistance stances and moral clarity on many issues. In short, al-Qaradawi is the antithesis of religious clerics who would do as they are told. A striking IslamOnline editor described to me how the crisis developed. It sounded something similar to a coup: the Sheik was removed from al-Balagh, the site's directors were relegated, a new management was installed (in fact imposed), and even the website passwords were changed so that employees could no longer access it. Devastated and enraged by the unwarranted moves, about 350 employees went on strike — only to find themselves subject to legal investigation by some company lawyers for exercising what is universally accepted as a fundamental right. The editor tells me that they were harshly criticised in particular for their uncompromisingly courageous coverage on Palestine and Gaza. Indeed, IslamOnline had worked tirelessly to bring greater awareness of the struggle in Palestine, to Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike. Following the tragic events of September 11, few websites have played the vital role that IslamOnline has. Its editors did not serve the cause of fanatics, with their dreadful interpretation of the world and themselves, and nor did they adopt the mouthpiece position in favour of Arab governments. Equally important, they did not try to falsify a "moderate" position to please any government — Arab or any other. Instead, they truly reflected and genuinely expressed the views of mainstream Muslims from all walks of life, and from all over the world. It was truly an impressive feat to see such an independent editorial line emerging from one Arab capital and largely funded by another. But it seemed too good to be true — thus the terrible, chaotic and devastating changes that brought this vital project to a standstill. The very means of presenting an eloquent Muslim voice to the world has been threatened. The story of IslamOnline is being presented as that between rival Arabs: governments, groups and individuals. Reductionist terminologies — such as conservatives vs moderates — are once again permeating the often predictable Middle East discourse. Many questions still remain unanswered. In fact, the story of IslamOnline pertains more to media freedom and editorial independence in Arab countries than much of the above. The struggle is between the self-serving politicking few, and hundreds of media professionals — brilliant and inspiring young women and men who made up the staff at IslamOnline. For them, IslamOnline was not just another job. It was a mission, a calling even, and millions of readers around the world appreciated their work, every word of it. One can only hope that IslamOnline will find its way back, with its current employees and current editorial line intact. The success story must not be allowed to end. Individual ambitions cannot stand in the way of this rare generational mission that is now simply indispensable. Ramzy Baroud (www.ramzybaroud.net) is an internationally-syndicated columnist and the Chief Editor of The Brunei Times. His latest book is "My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story" (Pluto Press, London), now available on Amazon.com

Website workers defiant after boss dismissed

Monday, April 12, 2010 Cairo, Employees at a popular Cairo-based Islamic website have vowed to continue their strike and launch a fundraiser to build a new site "to promote moderate Islam" after Qatar installed an alleged conservative new board to run the 10-year-old IslamOnline. "We will launch a worldwide initiative to set up a new website to promote moderate Islam through an international contribution," the 340 employees, who have been on strike since March 15, said in a statement. "We are determined to continue our strike until we get our financial entitlements and to protect the intellectual mission for which IslamOnline was set up in 1999," they added in a statement, a copy of which was obtained by Gulf News. The employees were infuriated this week when they learnt Shaikh Yousuf Al Qaradawi, an eminent Egyptian-born Qatari Muslim cleric, was removed as chairman of the Al Balagh Society, which owns the site. "The dismissal of employees and the removal of Al Qaradawi actually target the moderate mission of IslamOnline," said Hesham Jafar, an editor at the site. "We have learnt that the new board is displeased with the editorial policy of the site, particularly topics addressing young people and women," he told Gulf News. He claimed that three Qatari members of the board were behind this turmoil, which started earlier this month by referring employees to a disciplinary action for alleged violations of editorial regulations. "They [the three Qataris] do not want IslamOnline to interact with issues of modern life. Since its launch in 1999, the website has adopted a line of [Islamic] moderation and [observed] high professionalism." According to Jafar, the initiative to set up an alternative website will take the shape of a stock company. "Its stakes will be available for everyone. Employees will donate a portion of their still-withheld entitlements to this project. Islamic symbols and institutions should also support this idea." "This collective funding [of the suggested website] will block the repetition of the IslamOnline hijacking," said Adel Al Qadi, another editor at the troubled site.

A New Slogan...Want to Try It?

Friday 16 April 2010

A news item, published in this paper, stated that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is considering changing its famous slogan 'Islam is the solution' as a precaution against obstacles that it might face from the government, especially as articles within the constitution emphasise the danger of practicing politics based on religion. The news item adds that the Muslim Brotherhood is currently looking into the idea of adopting other slogans instead of or as well as 'Islam is the solution.' According to the news item, the Muslim Brotherhood said that "this slogan caused there to be many legal and political reservations." Muslim Brotherhood students at Egyptian universities had anticipated the MB's official idea or to be more specific, the MB's new position by using an alternative slogan, 'we hope for the best for Egypt' during the university student elections. They argued, as the news item indicates, that they coined that new slogan to alleviate security pressures.

What was the position of the reformist figure in the Brotherhood leadership hierarchy, Essam al Eryan, towards this new youthful slogan? Al Eryan "decreed" that the new student slogan does not contradict the most cherished and sacred slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood, 'Islam is the solution.' He believes that the new slogan is part of a larger

and more comprehensive slogan, namely, 'Islam is the solution.' It doesn't stop there. The Brotherhood mediator amazed us even further by stating that "every stage requires a different slogan." Al Eryan maintained that the slogan 'Islam is the solution' represents the identity of the Muslim Brotherhood. Of course the Muslim Brotherhood has its own way of interpreting this flagrant religious slogan and normalizing it within the civil state and I am talking about the constitution here not the regime because the MB is feeling this constitutional dilemma that lies at the core of these slogans and it came up with the following solution or ploy: whoever says that the 'Islam is the solution' slogan contradicts the constitution of the Egyptian state is wrong. These are the words of former Muslim Brotherhood Deputy Chairman Mohammed Habib. He believes that rejecting this slogan means rejecting the Egyptian constitution, the second article of which states that Islam is the official state religion. Habib says that those who oppose the slogan 'Islam is the solution' are actually "opposing and protesting the public order of the state." But, Mohammed Hassan Shaban, the journalist who wrote this news item, cleverly pointed out that Habib did not refer to the fifth clause of the constitution that he cited from that outlaws practicing politics based on religion. This controversy will never end; the theorists and politicians of the Muslim Brotherhood will always find a way out; they will always try verbal, emotional and constitutional tricks as well. This is not unusual with the Muslim Brotherhood and other bodies. We all remember how the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq dropped the word 'revolution' and opted for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. The then party leader Abdul Aziz al Hakim defended that change after securing enough votes for his party in the Iraqi parliament. We also recall how the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, after the war of liberation in 1991, called itself the Islamic Constitutional Movement in order to ride the wave of increasing Kuwaiti patriotism and demanding a return to the constitution and parliamentary life in Kuwait after the invasion. Also in Iraq today, the State of Law Coalition headed by Nouri al Maliki is nothing but a façade for the fundamentalist Dawaa Party. Let us return to Egypt; perhaps all this can be understood in light of the vehemence of political rivalry for power and rule in Egypt, especially as parliamentary elections are drawing closer. The war of words intensifies and arguments are being debated by rivals in a climate of electoral and political conflict. My goal is not to recommend one Arab political party over another in Egypt or elsewhere as that is another topic altogether. Rather, the aim here is to reflect specifically on this clear "flexibility" in changing and altering slogans that are meant to be sacred and irrevocable, as their guardians have always claimed. What the Muslim Brotherhood is doing in Egypt and elsewhere is political manoeuvring and the person carrying out these manoeuvres is open to change and transformation. Even Essam al Eryan, in the middle of defending the Muslim Brotherhood's slogan change and its durability, acknowledged that there was flexibility and willingness towards change if the position of its rival, i.e. the Egyptian authorities, forces them to adopt that approach. If the authorities show tolerance, the Muslim Brotherhood would introduce their sacred slogan unabashed. But if the authorities show vigilance and strictness then the MB would search for another slogan that is suitable to that stage and its requirements, and does not negate the basis of the main slogan. What does that mean? It means that the slogan is not the goal here but rather what the slogan leads to, in other words, power and rule by exploiting public sentiment and riding the wave of religion. It is true that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has

always been clever at switching positions quickly. It forged an alliance with the liberal Wafd party of Egypt at a certain period because it was working secretly. However, a few years ago, it allied with the rest of the leftists and the Nasserist party under the banner of Kefaya, the Egyptian Movement for Change. Kefaya originally emerged in 2004 with the goal of fighting inheritance of power. It then developed its demands and its discourse towards revolutionary political discourse, both internally and externally, and aims to cancel the peace treaties with Israel and revolutionize the Egyptian political orientation so as to turn the Egyptian regime into a radical, revolutionary regime. It is true that the two Muslim Brotherhood figures Essam al Eryan and Abdul Monim Abu al Futuh were among the signatories of Kefaya's manifesto but that was not enough to reassure Nasserist and Leftist patriarchs of the Muslim Brotherhood's renunciation of political ambitions to assume power. This prompted Abdul Halim Qandil, a Kefaya hawk, at some point and on several occasions, to express scepticism regarding the intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood towards the issue of inheritance of power and communication with Israel if the MB were ever rise to power. Qandil cited Essam al Eryan who said in an article published in October 2007 that "If the MB reached power it would recognize the state of Israel and honour the treaties signed by Egypt." To tell the truth, we cannot confirm what Qandil attributed to al Eryan. It is not important whether it is true or not. What really matters here is how a Nasserist figure from Kefaya now views the position of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sometimes it is far more important to know how others view you rather than focusing on how you view yourself. These pragmatic margins, with which the Muslim Brotherhood, unlike Kefaya, has distinguished itself, can be explained as follows: firstly, the fundamentals and the cultural and ideological foundations upon which the MB is based, particularly with respect to the issue of inheritance of power, is not far removed from the political Sunni notion, consistent with the theories of al Mawardi and others. The Muslim Brotherhood position on the issue of inheritance of power is equally open to rejection or acceptance. Serving its immediate interests is what determines its official position. If the MB declares a rejection then that would please the Kefaya movement and the international democratic culture just as much as it would vex the supporters of this. If they declare an acceptance, that might be the trump card the Muslim Brotherhood will play to win its future position, considering that the issue of inheritance of power is well established in the political juristic heritage. Secondly, the Muslim Brotherhood has a lot to win or lose in the political arena. Unlike the intellectuals of Kefaya who are backed by some figures in the press and other mediums, the Muslim Brotherhood has considerable weight on the ground and in parliament. I have previously analyzed the relationship between Kefaya and the Muslim Brotherhood in an article published on August 5, 2008 and I believe this analysis is still useful in interpreting the conduct of the Egyptian and non-Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood towards the contradiction between requirements of politics on the one hand and the obligations of the central doctrine on the other. The problem with the Muslim Brotherhood, and all Islamist political movements, is that they are two-faced entities that speak two languages. If they are politically embarrassed or are asked to make certain concessions, they seek refuge in the immunity of religion and start to remind others of how dangerous it is to abandon the constants of religion. On the other hand, if someone attacks them from the angle of religion and asks them how they could forgo Jihad and fighting for the sake of God (just like Jihadist movements are doing to Hamas now) or

how they could fall back with respect to the issues of women, entertainment and arts etc they worm their way out of it by using the excuse of political necessity and legitimate interests. The Muslim Brotherhood would then win over the religious camp and the political camp and enjoy heaven on earth and paradise in the afterlife. What caused all this chaos? I think the Arab political life and its predominant culture are the main reasons that such movements flourish as they develop amid an environment of frustration, cultural illiteracy and lack of criticism. If there had been actual development and progress in science and criticism and if there had been an economic foundation and a solid and just judicial system, we wouldn't be experiencing a period of stagnation and psychological frustration. It is the perfect environment for the growth of movements that promote hope in the afterlife and salvation. A saviour would then emerge and eliminate all sorts of injustice. This is what the Muslim Brotherhood slogan 'Islam is the solution' implies.

The slogan is reminiscent of the one adopted by the Abbasids to overpower the Umayyads: 'Pledge allegiance to Imam Reda from the family of the Prophet (PBUH), who will fill the world with equality and justice.' Such slogans aim to sell promises that are never fulfilled just until the makers of such promises rise to power. I wish the Muslim Brotherhood would come up with another slogan that might serve them well in other circumstances such as 'Muslims are the solution,' as human beings are the centre and target of any activity on this planet...I think!

Iraq

Political front

Post-election Iraq

Iraq's latest elections have proved that the future scenarios are still open for all possibilities. This means that both the Nouri al-Maliki government and the seven-year occupation have failed to put democracy on the right path in Iraq. The internal and regional players in Iraq have different, conflicting agendas. The Maliki bloc, the State of Justice and Law, talked about fraud while international observers said that the election process conformed with the international standards. They were the first who went to Tehran to get Iranian support after they lost marginally against their rivals the Iraqiya bloc of Iyad Allawi. The Sadrists are another group that is loyal to Iran. Their leader has just fled the country and lives in Tehran, but leads about 6,000 armed troops in the south from the Persian capital. Both al-Maliki and Sadrists blocs want to impose a Shi'ite domination of the government. This puts the country on the verge of another chaos and civil war. The Iraqiya bloc of former prime minister Allawi is a nationalist secular group. It believes that the future of the country cannot be built on sectarian division. They support reconciliation with non-Saddamist Baathists. In fact, the atrocity of Saddam Hussein was directed against all sectors and faiths. He had 17 Shi'ite ministers out of his 30-member cabinet. His first vice-president was a Kurd. It is unwise not to have reconciliation with Baathists. If Russia had condemned its army and security officers after the fall of communism, it would not have an army today. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution against Shah, the first decision taken by Ayatollah Khomeini was to pardon army and security officers. The problem is not about keeping the army only. Another important goal is achieved by pardoning and reconciliation, which is alienating those who are inclined to fight and to make resistance groups. Now the main resistance in Iraq is

under the leadership of Ezzat Ibrahim, the former vice-president of Saddam Hussein. In the north, the Kurds support the incumbent President Jalal Talabani to have a second term. The main Kurdish problem is to keep the culture and wealth for themselves under a semi-independent local government. They know that Arabs, Turks and Iranians will not be happy if they declare their independent state. They are subjected to regular military operations by Turkey and to a lesser degree by Iran to dismantle bases of armed groups. Syria treats them badly as well. However, while the Arab leaders were in Libya for a pan-Arab summit with Turkish participation, Talabani flew to Tehran to discuss the future government. Al-Qaeda is another terror player that refuses all other groups. To fight it, all groups should unite, and the army officers should be loyal to the country not to the sectarian groups. Before the Americans leave Iraq, they should find a solution for the country that they have occupied for false reasons. If they left before containing al-Qaeda there, terrorism will have a boost in Iraq and in other places. Iraqi politicians should put the country's interests above other interests. If they keep their loyalty to ideologies, the country will have two probable bad scenarios. The first is a civil war that may open the door to regional forces to play more to achieve their agendas. The second option that is still in mind of American strategies is to plot for a military coup with the return of dictatorship. This option, unfortunately, will cast doubt on viability of democracy not only in Iraq but also in many other places. Even the delay to form a government will put this option on the table as the Americans should leave Iraq by 2011 to concentrate on another failed front " Afghanistan. They may choose dictatorship in Iraq to prevent Iran from using the Iraqi file to serve its nuclear ambitions and to have a regime that can support their allies in the Gulf to reduce the cost of the region's defence process. The months ahead will tell.

Iraqi PM fights to hold power, risks sectarian war

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's postelection strategy suggests he is prepared for a long and bitter fight to hold on to power, even if it alienates the country's Sunni community and risks new sectarian warfare. Premier-elect Iyad Allawi is surrounded by security and cameras in Baghdad. The Iraqi leader is trying all sorts of legal maneuvers to deny victory to his chief opponent, former prime minister Ayad Allawi, whose secular, nationalist bloc won the most parliamentary seats in the March 7 elections and presumably the right to try to form a new government. Even if al-Maliki sticks with nominally legal measures, he risks serious damage to all the efforts to ease sectarian tensions which had begun to bear fruit three years after the US. troop surge. A resurgence of major violence would complicate US. plans to withdraw all its forces from Iraq by the end of next year. The showdown has cast a spotlight on Iraq's judicial process, which some have said is far from independent and often subject to outside pressures. And in such a young democracy with little institutional knowledge or precedent upon which to draw, the constitution and laws passed by parliament are not always clear. No issue is potentially more explosive than a committee's attempts to disqualify some winning candidates because of ties to Saddam Hussein's regime. Sunnis view the committee, led by a Shiite with ties to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, as nothing other than a group dedicated to purging Sunnis from government. While al-Maliki does not directly control the committee, he has certainly benefited from its actions and has done little to deter it. At least four candidates targeted by the committee are from Allawi's party list, which includes many Sunnis and won significant voter support from the minority sect. If

a court disqualifies enough candidates to tilt the race in al-Maliki's favor, that would be a huge provocation to Sunnis. Even before the final vote tallies were announced Friday, al-Maliki was maneuvering to put himself in a better position, likely sensing the results were not going his way. The prime minister went to the Supreme Court on Thursday and asked for a legal definition of what constitutes the largest bloc. The constitution says the coalition with the largest bloc in parliament gets the first crack at forming a government. Allawi's Iraqiya list has argued that this means their 91 seats al-Maliki's State of Law list won 89 give them the first opportunity. But the court ruled that the largest bloc could also be one created after election day through negotiations, giving al-Maliki time to find new partners and outmaneuver Allawi. If al-Maliki forms a government with a rival Shiite bloc, excluding Iraqiya entirely, Sunnis could feel disenfranchised, said Meghan L. O'Sullivan, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School and a former deputy national security adviser on Iraq for President George W. Bush. "The Sunnis perceive that they `won' this election in the sense that Allawi, who was the person that they put most of their votes and support behind, has the most number of parliamentary seats. So their inability to be in government, or even be given the chance to try to form a government, after they won, could be explosive," O'Sullivan said in an interview posted online by the Council on Foreign Relations. O'Sullivan said that although al-Maliki and Allawi, both Shiites, share an Arab nationalist outlook and a desire for a more centralized state, personality issues make a governing coalition between their two blocs highly unlikely. Sunnis, and even many Shiites, also suspect that al-Maliki is not sufficiently independent of Iran. At a news conference via satellite from Baghdad with reporters at the State Department, US Ambassador Christopher Hill declined to speculate on whether al-Maliki or Allawi would be able to form a coalition government. He said the prime minister has given no indication that he would not follow the law. "He has been very clear and very clear with us in private, very clear in public, that he will follow the law," Hill said. Since the election, the prime minister has called for a manual recount of the vote, attacked the United Nations for not supporting him and angrily challenged the results. "It's straight power politics," Anthony Cordesman, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "You're seeing somebody who basically wants to retain power. Over time, he's begun to see himself as a leading strong figure who can move Iraq forward." Al-Maliki's supporters defend the maneuverings as perfectly acceptable under the Iraqi constitution. "We raised our complaints, our appeals, and we will be loyal to the decision of the courts," said Sami al-Askari, a close confidante of al-Maliki. Independent observers such as Hussein al-Sahi, a spokesman of The Sun Network, an NGO which monitors Iraqi elections, have defended al-Maliki, saying it's a stretch to say that al-Maliki's decision to consult the court would undermine democracy. "Al-Maliki is not Saddam who issued laws against international standards," al-Sahi said. "Al-Maliki does not have an absolute power." But Allawi supporters say the tactics reek of opportunism designed to reverse the will of the people and that security forces have issued arrest warrants for some of their candidates. "Obviously the prime minister is trying to find ways to sabotage Iraqiya's clear win," said Maysoun al-Damlouji, a spokeswoman for the Iraqiya bloc. "We are still the largest bloc in parliament."

Iraq orders Baghdad vote recount

An electoral review panel has ordered a recount of ballots cast in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, during the March 7 general election, an official has said.

Hamdiya al-Husseini, Iraq's electoral commissioner, said a manual recount would begin immediately on Monday, a move that could have an impact on who becomes the country's next prime minister. Baghdad accounts for 68 seats in the 325-seat parliament, making it a key prize. The bloc led by Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent prime minister, had been seeking a manual recount after coming a close second to the Iraqiya bloc of Iyad Allawi, a former prime minister, in the election. "The committee discussed all the documents and evidence that prove that there was some manipulation in voting stations," Hassen al-Senaed, a parliamentarian in Maliki's bloc, said. "We expect an increase in our number of seats in Baghdad. The manipulation included the changing of signatures and the removal of names and numbers and changing of ballots." ***Irregularities claimed***

It has been more than a month since Allawi's secularist coalition won 91 seats, edging out the State of Law coalition of al-Maliki, by just two seats. However, no party has gained enough seats to rule over the country on its own and the blocs have been involved in negotiations in an attempt to form coalitions able to create a working majority in parliament. "Al-Maliki's bloc wanted a manual recount in five provinces," Zeina Khodr, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Baghdad, said. "They said they discovered irregularities [in the voting] and that 750,000 votes were manipulated. According to them it could change the outcome of the election, as it was such a close race," she said. Before the recount, State of Law won 26 seats to 24 for Allawi's Iraqiya in Baghdad. Ad Melkert, the UN special representative to Iraq, last month described the polls as "credible" after the electoral commission said there was no evidence of systematic or widespread fraud in the counting of ballots. The judicial panel that ordered the Baghdad recount was established by the electoral commission to handle complaints from aggrieved parties about the conduct of the election. ***Coalition building*** Maliki's State of Law and the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a Shia-led bloc that secured 70 seats in the election, have been seen as inching towards an agreement that could sideline Allawi. However, Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, which is part of the INA, said on Monday that said he did not see either al-Maliki or Allawi as having enough support, inside and outside Iraq, to become the next prime minister. We are talking about a person who should be accepted on a national level," he said. "This is the most important point because the prime minister is not going to be a prime minister of his own party or his political movement, but for all of Iraq. "On such a basis, we find it's difficult for Mr Maliki or even Mr Iyad Allawi to gain the needed acceptance." Maysoun Damlouji, Iraqiya's spokeswoman, dismissed al-Hakim's claims that Allawi did not have widespread support. We got a huge number of votes, which means he is accepted," she said.

"We are the only bloc that has the diversity; we have Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, we have them all, so if there is one who is widely accepted it is Mr Allawi."

Sadrists shun Iraq front-runners

Al-Jaafari, who was Iraq's prime minister in 2005-2006, won 24% of the Sadrists' referendum [EPA] Followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, an influential Shia Muslim leader of Iraq, have chosen Ibrahim al-Jaafari as their preferred candidate to become the country's next prime minister. Results from last week's referendum that the Sadrists held showed

al-Jaafari, a former prime minister, ahead of other front runners like Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent PM, and Iyad Allawi, another ex-premier. According to results obtained by Al Jazeera, al-Jaafari won 24 per cent of the vote, while al-Maliki got 10 per cent and Allawi secured nine per cent. Jafaar al-Sadr, a cousin of Moqtada al-Sadr who was on the ballot, secured 23 per cent of the 1.8 million ballots cast. Ahmad Chalabi, a member of the Iraqi National Alliance, got nine per cent. Though bereft of any legal authority, the two-day referendum was held after al-Sadr emerged as a kingmaker following Iraq's recently held national elections. Zeina Khodr, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Baghdad, said: "They [Sadrists] have made the announcement, their choice is Ibrahim al-Jaafari ...

"The Sadrist movement said they would abide by the choice of the people, which means more political uncertainty." **Big disappointment** The referendum results would contribute to more ambiguity to the Iraqi political scene. The situation has been complicated as it is by the interpretation of the constitution regarding who should name the prime minister - the bloc which won more votes in the ballots or the one which govern the biggest number of seats in the parliament. The results were a big disappointment for both Allawi and al-Maliki who wished to win the support of al-Sadr. Final results in Iraq's March 7 elections gave the Allawi-led Iraqiya just two seats more than State of Law bloc led by al-Maliki. The Sadrists won at least 39 seats in the 325-seat parliament making them the largest group within the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a mainly Shia Muslim coalition that placed third in the race. Although the ballot was nominally open to all Iraqis, the vast majority of voters are likely to have been Sadrist backers. The referendum was widely seen as a way for the Sadrist bloc, whose 30-something leader has been in Iran for about two years, to avoid giving its backing to al-Maliki. "With this referendum, the Sadrists have made a shrewd move to put pressure on the other political parties," Hamid Fadhel, a Baghdad University political science professor, said. "The negotiations with State of Law have stalled and the Sadrists want to push for someone other than Nouri al-Maliki [as premier], armed with popular support. ***Al-Sadr's allegation*** The Sadrists were crucial supporters when al-Maliki formed his government in 2006. But two years later, he turned the security forces on the Mahdi Army, the group's armed wing, jailing thousands of al-Sadr supporters in a campaign to destroy militias in the southern city of Basra and the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City. In comments to Al Jazeera, Moqtada al-Sadr has said that he recently turned down an offer by al-Maliki's camp to release his followers currently in government detention, in exchange for accepting an alliance with State of Law. However, Haider al-Abadi, an al-Maliki spokesman, rejected the claim. "There has been some dialogue and a committee was formed. They went to the prisoners to look at each case," he said. "[But] the constitution does not give the right to anyone to release them. Unless there is a new amnesty law in place, [such a release of prisoners] cannot be carried out." In the interview, al-Sadr also sharply criticised al-Maliki and described his government as a failure. "The new Iraqi government should be based on partnership, not on partisan, ethnic or sectarian bases," al-Sadr said.

Another National Unity Government in Baghdad?

April 09, 2010

As the political horse-trading among Iraq's political factions drags on in the wake of the country's parliamentary elections last month, there has been a growing call for the

formation of another so-called national unity government, which would include all of Iraq's political factions. The idea has sparked a debate in Iraq over the merits and deficiencies of unity government, with various factions and political figures lining up on either side of the proposal. Its proponents -- such as former parliament speaker Iyad al-Samara'i -- have **argued** that "reality requires" the formation of a national unity government, and that failing to do so could "keep marginalizing major factions inside Iraqi society." Likewise, deputy Ammar Tohme of the Iraqi National Alliance told RFE/RL's **Radio Free Iraq** that a national unity government is "a national solution, which will prohibit any one coalition from attempting to monopolize power." Even U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill has **hinted** that he believes a unity government might be the best outcome for Iraq. Opponents of a national unity government, however, have countered that such a formulation would result in continued political deadlock, leaving the next government paralyzed by too many competing factions and unable to govern effectively. Iyad Allawi, whose Al-Iraqiyah coalition won the most seats in the elections last month, **declared** that a national unity government would be "stagnant, as the current government has been." Allawi went on to argue that Iraq "needs to have a government that can function and provide...for the security of this country." Other political analysts have argued that a national unity government, while possibly successful in achieving short-term political stability in Iraq, would ultimately prove detrimental to the development of Iraqi democracy. They argue that the absence of a strong, vibrant opposition in this crucial period of Iraq's democracy would leave Iraq unable to develop a lasting tradition of opposition politics. Brookings Institution analyst Kenneth Pollack **argues** that a national unity government "would represent nothing but a temporary papering over all of the deep divisions among Iraq's political parties, and would simply bring those differences inside the government, inevitably paralyzing it. So while we could have the fiction of unity in the short term, we will have created a completely incapable Iraqi government unable to govern effectively in the months to come." In a recent **analysis**, Radio Free Iraq's Hashem Ali Mandee states that the controversy "raises the question of whether the Iraqi political parties understand the concepts embodied in Western democracies, where governance is seen as a means to achieve national goals, and to serve the higher interests of the homeland and its citizens." "In countries which are subject to the rule of dictatorial regimes or are in the early stages of democratic development, governance is often seen as an end in itself, sought by politicians for the purposes of narrow personal and partisan interests," Mandee explained. "Many Iraqis are increasingly convinced that...political forces are interested in forming an extended government of national unity simply because they want to ensure their own participation in the government." Mandee's analysis is supported by the fact that many of the political leaders who have come out in favor of a national unity government would likely see significant personal benefit from such an arrangement. The fractured Al-Tawafuq (Accord) Front of Iyad al-Samara'i suffered a crushing defeat at the polls this year, dropping from 44 seats to just six. It is telling that both Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, which placed first (91 seats) and second (89 seats) respectively, have been cool to the proposal, as they continue to race to see who can form a viable government first.

Iran Urges Formation Of Unity Government In Iraq

April 11, 2010 (Reuters) -- Iran has urged leaders in neighboring Iraq to form a national unity government that includes Sunni Muslims. Iranian Ambassador Hassan Kazemi Qomi said the Iraqiya coalition, which includes Sunnis and Shi'ites and won the largest share of seats in last month's parliamentary election, would hold discussions in Tehran in the coming days. Iraqi political leaders have been in talks to form a government since the inconclusive election. Shi'ite Iran has in the past advocated a Shi'ite-dominated government. "We support and encourage the participation of all the parties, but this is an internal Iraqi thing. It is only consulting [with Iraqiya], no more," Qomi told a news conference in Baghdad. "We are open to all parties." Since the vote, a number of delegations from Shi'ite and Kurdish factions have travelled to Tehran for talks. Iraqiya leader Iyad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite and former prime minister, had criticised opponents for going to Iran after the polls. Asked about Qomi's comments, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, said: "I think that's up to the Iraqis to decide." Iraqiya finished first in the election with 91 seats, two ahead of the State of Law coalition of Prime Minister Nuri Maliki. Anti-U.S. cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who could play a key role in choosing a prime minister able to command a majority, echoed Qomi's remarks, saying he supported a government that included all Iraqi factions. In a rare interview on Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television, Sadr said Maliki would be an unacceptable choice as prime minister in the new government. An internal referendum in the Sadrist party last week backed former prime minister Ibrahim Jaafari for the post. "This is the will of the people and I have to carry it out," said Sadr, whose followers won about 40 seats as part of the third-placed Iraqi National Alliance. It was not clear when or where the interview was filmed.

Sadr, who has been studying theology in Iran for two years, said he did not reject Allawi as a prospective prime minister, but that his voter base was concerned that Allawi was close to supporters of the ousted dictator Saddam Hussein. The inconclusive election promised weeks of potentially divisive talks between political blocs to form a new government. There has been an upsurge in bombings and other attacks since the beginning of the month, in which more than 100 people have been killed.

Iran Demands UN Probe Of NATO In Iraq, Afghanistan

Concerns over Iraq's government

It has been more than a month since Iraqiya, the secularist party, won the most cabinet seats in Iraq's national elections, defeating Shia religious parties who have dominated the political landscape over the last four years. But no parties have gained enough seats to solely rule over the country, which makes a national alliance a must for an effective government to exist. However, the religious parties and Iraqiya have failed to form an alliance due to major disagreements - including who should acquire the post of prime minister. And now concerns are rising among the public over whether key leaders may be left out of the government formation and the serious instability it could bring about.

Iraq: Al-Iraqiya List Threatens to Withdraw from Political Process

Monday 19 April 2010

By Ma'ad Fayad

London, Asharq Al-Awsat- Maysun al-Damaluji, the official spokeswoman of Al-Iraqiya List led by former Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, has threatened their coalition's

withdrawal from "the entire political process, including withdrawal from the next Iraqi parliament, if some parliamentary blocs insist on concluding an alliance between them in an attempt to exclude or marginalize it." Al-Damaluji told Asharq Al-Awsat by telephone from Baghdad yesterday: "We consider the alliance between Iraqi Nation Alliance [INA] (led by Ammar al-Hakim's Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council [IISC]) and the State of Law Coalition [SLC] (led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki) a sectarian alignment since they represent a single sectarian component. This is the only factor that brings them together which means the marginalization or exclusion of the other principal components in Iraqi society." She pointed out that "Al-Iraqiya List does not give legitimacy to such an alignment and will not take part in any government this alliance forms and which takes Iraq back to the pre-2005 atmospheres, something we reject totally." She referred to "the statement of Al-Sadr Trend Leader Muqtada al-Sadr yesterday (the day before yesterday) that he would oppose any sectarian alliance and his description of the INA and SLC alliance as sectarian that would marginalize the others." Regarding the statements by incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki or some of his (Al-Dawa) party members or in other entities calling for the inclusion of Al-Iraqiya List in the formation of the government, Al-Iraqiya's official spokeswoman said: "Our List and its candidate Dr. Iyad Allawi should be asked constitutionally and officially to form the government as this is our legitimate right and not at anyone's call for us to participate in forming it." She pointed out that "the constitution gives us as a winning list in the elections the right to form the government at the request of the president of the republic. We will then talk with the other blocs and alliances to participate in this government. If we are unable to form it in one month, then we will see what we have to say. We are open to all and have no red lines concerning any person, bloc, or alliance. We have strong relations with Al-Sadr Trend, the IISC, the Kurdish Alliance, and Al-Fadilah Party. There are members in our List who have talked to SLC members." Al-Damaluji went on to say: "Our List is further way from sectarianism since it includes all the Iraqi people's religious, doctrinal, and ethnic components and we therefore refuse to work with any sectarian party that takes Iraq backward. We will not abandon the trust of the Iraqis who gave us their votes. Even those who did not vote for us are still our people's sons for whom we are working." She stressed that "Al-Iraqiya List does not give legitimacy to the next government and the political process if it is established on sectarian bases that perpetuate the difficult conditions in which Iraq is living and the loathsome quotas. All the options are open to us and within the constitution." She called her List's options "open", which is, "either we form a parliamentary opposition and it would be an honor for us to oppose the sectarian alignment and to concentrate our action on serving our people -- the Iraqis tested us when we had 25 seats in the previous parliament and we acted from the opposition benches and this increased our people's trust in us and they elected us and we won 91 seats -- or we withdraw from the entire political process, including the next parliament." She underlined the "List's cohesiveness and the belief in its program and decisions. Its leading members meet almost daily to discuss the current situations in Iraq. There are coordination, media, and political committees that meet constantly." She described "as desperate and impossible the attempts by some blocs or persons to fragment the List by offering inducements and promises of certain posts and interests but they have failed dismally and have not affected the List's unity."

Democracy under occupation

Pondering questions thrown up by the seventh anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, Mona Anis recalls a 2003 visit to Baghdad shortly after US president G W Bush announced "mission accomplished"

Over the past seven years, one of the most often-quoted slogans with regard to the American occupation of Iraq has been the phrase "mission accomplished," written on a giant sign that stood behind former US president Bush when he gave his famous 1 May 2003 speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln announcing "victory" in Iraq.

These two words are an economical summary of the misguided belief behind the US-led invasion of Iraq, seeing it as the "liberation" of the country that would be welcomed by all the population.

A more elaborate way of saying the same thing was uttered by former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld when he was asked two days after the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Al-Fardous Square in Baghdad, supposed to usher in a new era of freedom and peace, about the on-going looting of priceless monuments and artifacts under the eyes of US army.

Rumsfeld explained that "stuff happens" and that "freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things." He concluded that "they're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things. And that's what's going to happen here."

Given the near-total destruction of Iraq and the continuing US military casualties seven years after Rumsfeld promised "wonderful things" in the country, one legitimate question regarding this illegitimate war and its exorbitant human and material cost would be was it really a miscalculation? Or were the war's tragic consequences, which continue to unfold before the eyes of the world to the present, among its aims from the beginning?

Another legitimate question concerns the sheer magnitude of the US military force in Iraq and its anticipated withdrawal by the end of 2011. The figures are staggering, and they justify any scepticism one might feel regarding the possibility of a total withdrawal by the set date, or at any time shortly afterwards either.

According to an article by US Lieutenant-General James H. Pillsbury, deputy commanding general of the US Army Materiel Command, that appeared in the Washington Post, "there are more than 341 facilities; 263,000 soldiers, Defense Department civilians and contractor employees; 83,000 containers; 42,000 vehicles; 3 million equipment items; and roughly \$54 billion in assets" belonging to US forces in Iraq.

Another long-overdue question concerns those Iraqis who cooperated with the US in the criminal attack on their country. While it was possible to understand the pent-up frustration of the Iraqi opposition under the regime of Saddam Hussein when war broke out in 2003, seven years into the occupation, and with its disastrous consequence evident across the country, there is no excuse for those who still cooperate with the occupiers.

In May 2003, following a visit to occupied Iraq, this writer tried to understand the anti-Arab sentiments felt by a large part of the Iraqi opposition. "Perhaps all this is the result of a rich and multi-layered national history trying to find its own level, torn between the urge to exorcise the demons of yet another bloody chapter in its history and the pull of strong Arab national sentiments in the heartland of Arabism. A happy balance at this

difficult moment cannot easily be struck, and it would be cruel, in this period of self-discovery and against a background of unspeakable suffering, to proffer either judgment or criticism," I wrote then.

At a British Academy conference in London last month entitled "Rethinking the Middle East: Values, Interests and Security Concerns in Western Policies towards Iraq and the Wider Region," I was unable to sympathise with Muwaffaq al-Rubaie, a member of the Iraqi Governing Council set up at the beginning of the US occupation and Iraqi National Security Advisor until last year, when he defended the shock-and-awe US campaign against his country, saying that if history were to repeat itself he would want things to happen in exactly the same shocking way.

He even went further and said that in his opinion other Arab countries deserved to be "shocked and awed" as well if their people were to enjoy democracy. This was a form of generosity to which the only possible answer is "thanks, but no thanks."

While the wounds of the Saddam era were still open in May 2003, and mass graves were being dug up across Iraq, today criticism is overdue for all those who condoned the fateful decisions taken by the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, the repercussions of which still haunt the country to this day.

Two such decisions, framing my 2003 visit, were the de-Baathification order and the order to dissolve the Iraqi armed forces, both of which were decreed with the full blessing of the Iraqi supporters of the invasion. A day after my arrival in Baghdad on 15 May, the administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer III, announced the de-Baathification of Iraqi society, and on the last day of my visit, 25 May, the Iraqi army was dissolved, making 400,000 Iraqi servicemen redundant.

The first section of the de-Baathification order concerned "eliminating the Party's structure and removing its leadership from positions of authority and responsibility in Iraqi society" and "banning from future employment in the public sector" the four top ranks in the Baath Party hierarchy, numbering some 30,000 people according to opponents of Saddam, but many more according to other sources speculating from their own experience.

As if this was not bad enough, the second part of the order also sounded like a recipe for disaster. It stipulated that any senior civil servant, university professor or doctor would now have to be scrutinised for any possible links with the Baath, adding that "those proven to be Baath Party members will be removed from their employment, including the more junior ranks of member and active member." This was in a country where whole sections of the civil service and the liberal professions had had to fill out Baath Party membership forms in order to be appointed.

An item in the Iraqi newspaper Al-Zaman on 20 May 2003 revealed that an open letter had been addressed to Bremer by a group of veteran Baathists, warning him of the consequences of the purge he was carrying out and challenging him to succeed in purging the estimated 15 million Iraqis who had either been members of the Baath Party under the previous regime, or had been close to it.

The authors of this open letter called the order a violation of human rights, and they called on Bremer to study the history of the Baath Party, which had been hijacked by Saddam who had also committed crimes against the leadership of the Party in 1979.

If the figure of 15 million Party members sounds like an exaggeration, everyone I talked to in Baghdad conceded that there were at least eight million Iraqis with some connection

to the Baath. The vital question on the minds of almost all the Iraqis I met in Baghdad then was how could society be purged of millions of people without ending in a witch-hunt that would consume the country in endless civil strife?

Was strife of this sort the aim of the war from the very beginning? Will Iraq emerge in one piece from the long night of the occupation? These are questions that will remain without an answer for a long time.

For the time being, one image from Iraqi writer Fuad Al-Takarli's brilliant novel *al-Raj' al-Baeid*, which is set against the background of the failed 1963 Baath Party coup and has been very ably translated by Catherine Cobham under the title *The Long Way Back*, seems to sum up the present position of the majority of Iraqis. This is an image of "a person listening to his own death rattle, hearing himself dying; even if it was only for a moment, a second, a tenth of a second, he could hear the sound of his death."

Geo strategic front

Why are the Iraqis in Saudi Arabia?

Thursday 15 April 2010

Whilst most Iraqi politicians are visiting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki called on neighboring states to stop acting like "guardians" of his country. Is al Maliki aware of what is happening around him? It doesn't seem so! Most of those who attacked Iyad Allawi for visiting Saudi Arabia before the Iraqi elections are visiting Riyadh today, so what has changed? Have they been relieved of the pressure of al Maliki? Or have they been relieved of the obstacle of the Iraqi elections? [The change] might be due to both reasons but what's more important is that most Iraqi politicians have realized the significance of Iraq returning to its natural environment for internal reasons and also because of Iran's own isolation and internal division. Iraqi politicians have realized that the importance of Iran today lies in suspension and not facilitation. The result of the recent Iraqi elections – even if the difference was two votes – was equivalent to a second blow to Iran in the region after the recent election in Lebanon, as the Iranian project failed in both countries, despite what the Iranians did in Iraq. Suffice it to mention what US Vice President [Joe Biden] said about Tehran spending up to 100 million dollars on the Iraqi elections. The Iranian project failed in Iraq not because of other countries interfering, which is what al Maliki and others are trying to claim today, inasmuch as it was due to the sense of nationalism that pushed the Iraqis to make a difference. The Iraqi politician cannot ignore this. Moreover, the international isolation of Iran is no longer a secret, and in fact, on an Arab level, the comments made by Syrian President Bashar al Assad on the need for serious consideration in studying a proposal for an association of Arab neighboring countries that was proposed by Arab League Secretary General Mr. Amr Musa must be read very carefully.

Al Assad's statement shows two things; the first is that Syria and the Arabs do not want a role for neighboring countries even if it is Turkey, for example, because that would mean dwarfing the Arab role. Moreover, Turkey has become an Arab state, not a bridge or mediator between the Arabs and the West or between the Arabs and Israel. [Secondly it shows that], the Arabs also do not want Iran to have a role in their own affairs for two reasons; the first is that there is rejection on the Arab street of Iranian interference in Arab affairs and this was made clear in Lebanon and Iraq; [the second reason is that]

Tehran is facing increasing international isolation and internal divisions that are still bothering the Mullah regime in Iran. This all explains what pushed the Iraqi politicians to act and pave the way for a new, old political horizon and one that is natural with the Saudi neighbor. At the same time however it seems that al Maliki is still stuck in winter time and is yet to realize that the season has changed on the political scene around him both internally and externally. Of course, we hope that the Iraqis will always visit Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and all Arab countries as guests, and we also hope to see Saudi representation in Iraq; however politics is not based on hopes but on interests and facts on the ground and this is what pushed the Iraqi politicians to take the action they are taking today, after it became clear that the Iranian project in the region failed and after seeing Iran's international isolation and its internal uncertainty. Therefore, the Iraqi politicians today are acting like clever traders and not putting all their eggs in one basket and this is in precaution of the days ahead.

Economic front

50 Chinese firms exhibit goods at fair in southern Iraqi province

Azzaman, April 15, 2010 A trade exhibition at the southern city of Nasiriya has drawn 50 Chinese firms, a senior provincial official says. "Nasiriya is now playing host to 50 Chinese firms exhibiting various products," said Ali Fahad, a deputy governor. Nasiriya is the capital of Dhiqar Province which mainly relies on agriculture as the mainstay of its economy. The Chinese are very much interested in markets across the country. Shops brim with Chinese goods almost everywhere in Iraq. Fahad said the exhibition will continue until the end of April. The goods on show include clothes, foodstuffs and electronics. The fair is the first such economic activity wholly undertaken by foreign firms in the province. Provincial officials see the fair and the large interest by Chinese firms as a good signal for a better economic future for the impoverished region. "The exhibition is important for the province's economy. It encourages foreign firms other than the Chinese to come forward," Fahad said. He did not say whether the Chinese would invest in the province's poor and rickety infrastructure. However, Fahad said: "The Province has made it very easy for the Chinese to take part in the exhibition," He did not elaborate.

Iraq strikes €17 million deal for purchase of seven agricultural aircraft

Azzaman, April 14, 2010 Iraq has struck a deal with a foreign firm to purchase seven agricultural aircraft, the Agriculture and Water Resources Ministry said. "The Agriculture Minister Akram Hakeem has signed the contract with a foreign aircraft manufacturer for the purchase of seven agricultural aircraft," a statement by the ministry said. The statement said the aircraft will be used for spraying and battling agricultural pests and diseases. The statement did not reveal the name of the foreign firm but said the aircraft would cost €17 million. The deal, according to the statement, covers spare parts for the aircraft and training of Iraqi pilots. The first batch of two aircraft is expected to be delivered in eight months, the statement added.

Social front

Lebanon

Political front

Students of various confessions commemorate Civil War

Special to The Daily Star Religious chants called for prayer at 11 am on Tuesday morning at Sacred Heart school of Kfarhabab-Ghazir as ninth graders from five different schools gathered to commemorate the bitter symbol that is the April 13, a tragic date for Lebanon. The gathering of over 300 students and teachers within the serene walls of the Sacred Heart Church appeared ordinary at first glance, but when looking more closely, one is suddenly delightfully surprised at the sight of neatly veiled little girls seated next to their fellow students in checkered Catholic school uniforms, united by prayer. It wasn't the first time that the brave 14-year-olds defied social stratification. Sacred Heart Kfarhabab, which is officially a Catholic school, has been collaborating with Kawthar school in the southern suburbs of Beirut, which is mostly Shiitte students, Chouf National College, mostly Druze, the secular Lycée Lamartine of Koura and Sacred Heart Haykaliya, which is also in the north and mostly Sunni. The five schools have been in touch since the beginning of the school year with the creation of a project entitled "Lebanon unites us." Students were introduced to one another at first through a pen pal program, and in December, the Sacred Heart students travelled to Baaqlin eager to meet their friends from Chouf National College. Together they exchanged food, gifts, played soccer and visited a church, mosque and synagogue in Deir al-Qamar. As acquaintances evolved into friendships, the students united again for the symbolic date of the beginning of the Civil War to say no to violence and division. "Even though grown ups have failed in the past, it does not mean that you should give up, and you have all already defied long-lasting divisions by uniting here today" said Pascal Mesthi, who is in charge of ninth and 10th graders at Sacred Heart Kfarhabab. After prayers were dedicated to the Virgin Mary, a uniting religious figure for Muslims and Christians, the students headed toward the school's theater. A young brunette with beautiful hair reaching down to her waist held hands with her friend who was elegantly veiled with a light blue scarf as they quietly walked toward the auditorium. If only their grandparents could have witnessed it. Lynne, a student from Chouf National College, first took to the stage. "We should remember this date and learn from it, and let April 13, 2010, be a day of forgiveness and love," she shyly stated as the crowd applauded with enthusiasm. A verse from the Koran dedicated to Mary was sung by Ryan, a young girl from Kawthar School, it was followed by chants by the Sacred Heart choir, accompanied by violin. "Religion does not separate, it is extremism that separates, and so let us build unifying bridges by drawing the strength from our common belief in God," said a student from Kawthar. The students gathered in the school's playground to stage a protest against any repetition of the 1975-90 Civil War, carrying colorful banners advocating peace and unity. Sister Hyam Abou Jaoudeh, the principal of Sacred Heart, told The Daily Star that the program would continue as the students move on to the 10th grade in order for these strong relationships and life-changing values to persist. Asked if there was a possibility that these feelings of unity will fade as the students grow older and move on to the real world, Sister Abou Jaoudeh stated: "Only God knows if this feeling will persist. We have done our best to help them grow up amongst these important values, but it's also up to the families to join us in this educational quest for unity."

Youth unite in activities commemorating Civil War

Special to The Daily Star “We want to be the light of Lebanon and the peace of Lebanon,” shouted 18-year old Dima Maria Nammau, a student at the Sisters of the Sacred Heart College. Her sentiments were echoed by hundreds of other young people who gathered on Damascus Road Tuesday to commemorate the passing of 35 years since the outbreak of the Civil War. They planted trees, filled flower pots which will line the busy street, and painted kilometers worth of crumbling gray walls a boisterous shade of yellow. “We want to bring unity to the whole of Lebanon and for all the political factions to be considered equal,” Nammau said. “We want Lebanon to grow into a thriving modern country with all the benefits of new technologies, but, we also want to stay true to Lebanon, to what we are and what our parents were and had to live through,” she added. Students from 14 schools from across Lebanon, representing the country’s distinct sects and faiths, all took part in the event. They walked in mixed groups, carrying the nation’s flag and matching T-shirts marked with their schools emblems on the front and symbols of peace and unity on the back. The drive was part of the “Peace Between Us ... Or Goodbye Lebanon” campaign and was organized by Lebanese NGO Joy of Giving, which is dedicated to rebuilding schools and communities left damaged after years of war. Joy of Giving was also responsible for a live television broadcast which saw Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud take questions from young volunteers about sources of civil unrest in Lebanon. The program was aired jointly on television stations between 4.30 and 6 pm. Alongside revamping the long road, the students also hung banners to honor those who were killed, went missing or were kidnapped during the 15-year conflict. The black and white photographs, of both old and young alike, will now hang as a poignant memorial to victims reminding passers by of Lebanon’s tragic history. “This day is very important to all Lebanese people,” said 15-year old Hind Khabbazi from Khadija Kubra School. “While we should never forget, we do not need this terrible memory. We need to move on and look to the future. “That is why I am so proud of what we are doing here,” she said. “We are doing something to make our Lebanon a better place for everyone.” The newly planted trees and plants will make a lasting difference to the Damascus Road area and have been chosen both for their aesthetic effect and their positive environmental impact. Majida Warda, a teacher from Ghobeiri First Public High School for Girls, who planted flowers with her 12th grade class, said: “Today has been a great day and the class has really enjoyed coming out and planting beautiful flowers,” adding that “it is an important cause and we’re all happy to have participated.”

Sayegh committed to improving access for disabled

Disabled access to public institutions will be improved, according to Social Affairs Minister Salim Sayegh. In a joint news conference on Monday with Britain’s ambassador to Lebanon, Sayegh said that committing to easier access to facilities for people with disabilities represented “an opportunity to work on a framework concerning a very important issue for society.” UK Ambassador Frances Guy welcomed the announcement. “I am pleased to hear Minister Sayegh’s strong commitment to improving access for the disabled in Lebanon,” she said. “This is a welcome voice that needs to be heard more often.”

Also in attendance was 11-time Paralympic Gold Medalist Tanni Grey-Thompson, who spoke about her experiences as a disabled athlete.

Sayegh said Grey-Thompson was a role model and showed how people can overcome challenges with sufficient will.

“We are doing our best to provide what we can for the handicapped,” Sayegh added. Lebanon has thousands of disabled individuals, many bearing disfigurements from destructive past conflicts. Since 1995, a total of 70,423 people have signed up for Beirut’s handicapped card scheme, currently the only way of legally proving a disability. According to Sayegh, in the same time period, Beirut residents have received over 5 million services, including the provision of wheelchairs, treatment and diagnosis. In addition, 76,000 people across the country are currently eligible for municipality tax-breaks on account of their disability.

Sylvana Lakkis, a veteran disabled rights activist from the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU), said Lebanon still had a long way to go before it could claim to treat disabled people in a suitable manner. “There are efforts being exerted in order to improve the situation, but in Lebanon we still need lots of time to reach the stage they have in the UK,” she said.

Sayegh admitted that work was required. “We have made some achievements, but those are below our expectations to provide the best facilities possible,” he said.

Guy announced she and Grey-Thompson had met with Sports Minister Ali Abdullah, who had “undertook to improve access to sports facilities for the public in general and for disability athletes in particular ... I look to you all to help him implement this commitment.”

The 2012 Paralympic Games will be held in London and, with Lebanon boasting a host of world-class disabled athletes – including Olympic Bronze Medalist Edward Maalouf – Guy urged as many Lebanese as possible to participate in two years’ time. “Lebanon has some of the most talented disabled athletes in the world who have already shown that they can win medals,” she said.

Lakkis said that Monday’s deliberations made the LPHU “feel a certain positivism that the law [providing better access to those with disabilities] may soon be ratified.”

As for the forthcoming municipal elections, Lakkis added, “we hope to see facilities that will allow us to participate in voting and in running for seats.”

Politicians on soccer pitch put on rare display of Lebanese unity

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

Saad Hariri: “On the occasion of April 13, we confirm our complete commitment to the Taif Accord, which not only put an end to the Civil War but also laid down the guidelines toward fortifying national consensus and developing our political system.”

“I also take this occasion to confirm what was mentioned in the Cabinet’s policy statement about closing the file of the displaced ... The human and social suffering from not knowing the fate of missing people must also end.”

“On this occasion, I call on all the Lebanese to make their rejection of the Civil War a daily practice.”

Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun: “On the occasion of April 13, the date of the downfall of Lebanese society in all its institutions, we cannot rebuild the society with the same mentality that governed the past phase because that is why Lebanon always stumbles again, as no one puts the country’s interests [first] but rather his own.”

Former Premier Najib Mikati: “We believe the overwhelming majority of Lebanese reject a return to the logic of war and internal division, and have truly begun to take a path of

real national cohesion, but ending the war doesn't come with a ceasefire, or by forgetting, but by learning the lessons of the past. We hope that the political sides in conflict have learned the lessons from the recent past and all of the painful episodes of the history of the Civil War.”

The Democratic Renewal Movement, Youth Organization:

“The sharp political division that has characterized recent years has highlighted scenes that confirm the absence of a true treatment of the actual reasons that led to the tragedy of 1975. “The ease with which violence and political crime is resorted to remains a tangible reality. Sectarian leaders continue to fortify the tribal and sectarian affiliations of the Lebanese at the expense of their civic affiliation. There are still attempts to draw Lebanon into existing foreign agendas. Socio-economic advancement continues to remain blocked for a large number of young Lebanese people, and political and institutional reforms continue to be stalled.” The National Campaign to Abolish Mentioning Confessions in Personal Status Registers: “We must end the real reasons that render our nation fertile ground for various conflicts. We must do away with the roots of war and internal conflict by beginning to build a true nation, which can only take place by ridding ourselves of the sectarian regime, by eliminating sectarianism from people’s minds and legal texts.” “Let Saturday, April 17, be the first step. Young people of Lebanon, in all governorates, we call on you to head to civil registration offices in all qadas beginning at 9 pm, to remove a reference to sect in civil registration.”

Scud missiles would be odd choice for nimble Hizbullah - analysts

Reuters Long-range Scud missiles, which Israel has accused Syria of sending to Lebanon’s Hizbullah, seem unlikely weapons of choice for a nimble guerrilla outfit.

“Hizbullah needs to float like butterflies, sting like bees. They don’t need something that lumbers along like an ox,” British defense analyst Charles Heyman said. For now, US officials say they believe Syria intended to transfer the missiles – which Damascus denies – but that they have no indications that any Scuds have been moved to Lebanon.

US President Barack Obama’s administration said after the Israeli accusations emerged that it was “increasingly concerned” about the transfer of more sophisticated weaponry to Hizbullah. The Scud scare fits into the wider context of a decades-old conflict pitting Israel against Syria, which seeks the return of the Golan Heights occupied in the 1967 war, argued Joshua Landis, a Syria specialist at the University of Oklahoma. “This new development could not have been better timed to throw a monkey wrench into Washington’s engagement process with Syria,” he wrote in his Syria Comment blog, noting that Robert Ford, named ambassador to Damascus after a five-year gap, has yet to win confirmation by the full Senate. “There are many who would like to stop it, not least because Obama seems ready to push forward efforts to resolve the long-festered Arab-Israeli conflict,” Landis added. Scuds make Israelis nervous because Iraq, under its former leader Saddam Hussein, fired 39 of the missiles at Israel in the 1990-91 Gulf conflict, albeit with conventional warheads, not chemical ones likely to have prompted devastating Israeli retaliation. “From a military perspective, you question why Hizbullah would have a Scud ... but it is amazingly evocative as a name, so in political, psychological terms, it’s an important escalation – if true,” said British defence expert Paul Beaver. About 11 meters long, a Scud usually is fired from a huge wheeled transporter-erector-launcher, which itself is backed by support vehicles. A launch needs 45 minutes to prepare, Beaver said. One Israeli official said Hizbullah had received only

the missiles to place in “improvised silos,” not the launcher and tow truck. It was not immediately clear how the guerrillas could launch the missile without its companion equipment. Hizbullah, allied to Iran and Syria, has neither confirmed nor denied adding Scuds to its arsenal, as Israeli President Shimon Peres stated last week, but some experts are sceptical. Uzi Rubin, a founder of Israel’s Arrow anti-missile program and now a private consultant to the Defense Ministry, voiced surprise at reports of Scuds reaching Hizbullah. “This is a nonsense move. What do they need Scuds for?” Rubin asked. “They already have the [Iranian-made] Fateh-110, which has a similar range and, being a solid-fuel rocket, is far less cumbersome. Okay, so Scuds weigh a ton while the Fateh-110 is half a ton. [There’s] nothing to stop them firing two Fateh-110s.”

The guerrillas rained mostly short-range Katyusha rockets on northern Israel during a 2006 war in which nearly 1,200 people, mainly civilians, were killed in Lebanon.

Hizbullah killed 158 Israelis, 43 of them civilians hit by rocket attacks.

Israel failed to stop the Katyusha strikes, but analysts say it swiftly knocked out Hizbullah’s larger missiles. “Early in the Lebanon campaign, the Israelis were able to target and destroy Hizbullah’s intermediate and medium-range missiles,” Beaver said. “It’s hard to hide a Scud. It requires an erector launcher, refueling trucks, a panoply of equipment,” he said. Heyman said Scuds would be easy meat for Israel’s military. “Within three or four minutes of a launch, the whole area would be an inferno of high explosives from counter-battery fire.” Israeli warplanes fly daily into Lebanese airspace, although the border has been mostly quiet since the 2006 war, with UN and Lebanese army troops patrolling an enclave where Hizbullah has no visible armed presence. Israel complains the peacekeepers do too little to prevent the Lebanese Shiite guerrillas from rearming. Syria has said Israel’s “fabrications” about Scud deliveries were intended to “raise tension further in the region and to create an atmosphere for probably Israeli aggression.”

Even if Scud deliveries were verified, Israel might make no pre-emptive move, unless Syria took the risky step of also supplying Hizbullah with chemical or even biological warheads.

A former Israeli general, who asked not to be identified, said only hard, public evidence would warrant an Israeli attack.

“It would take, for example, a declaration by Hizbullah that this [a non-conventional Scud warhead] is part of its arsenal,” he said. – Additional reporting by Dan Williams in Jerusalem

Aoun anticipates electoral battle in Beirut polls

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun announced Tuesday that the Beirut district would witness an electoral battle in the upcoming municipal elections, dismissing recent media reports regarding a potential agreement with the Future Movement.

“We will lose the elections but that is fine,” Aoun told reporters at his residence in Rabieh following his bloc’s weekly Tuesday meeting. Earlier Tuesday, Prime Minister Saad Hariri discussed with Beirut District I MPs the upcoming municipal elections, as the premier stressed his commitment to parity between Christians and Muslims in the capital’s municipality council. March 14 Christian parties won all five seats against FPM

candidates during the June 2009 parliamentary elections in the district, after the capital was divided into three constituencies to guarantee a Christian majority in District I. MP Michel Pharaon told reporters following the meeting that the “door remained open to any potential alliances,” adding that “matters are heading toward forming a large coalition of political forces.” “There is one unrepresented movement that we will talk to based on logic and with responsibility,” Pharaon added in reference to the FPM. For his part, MP Nadim Gemayel also stressed his commitment to parity between Christians and Muslims in the capital’s council. Unlike parliamentary elections, which designate a specific number of seats for each sect, municipal elections function based on informal arrangements to ensure a specific number of seats go to various sects. However, the actual voting can upset the “agreed-upon” ratios of seats for each sect. “We are committed to true Christian representation,” Gemayel added following a meeting with Maronite Bishop of Beirut Boulos Matar who was accompanied by Pharaon. Similarly, Zahle seems to be heading toward an electoral battle between the Popular Bloc and the former Zahle in the Heart bloc MP Nicolas Fattoush, on the one hand, and March 14-backed candidates on the other. Fattoush expressed Tuesday an openness to an alliance with his Greek Catholic political rival Popular Bloc leader Elie Skaff. Fattoush, a former member of the Zahle in the Heart March 14-backed bloc that swept all seven parliamentary seats in the June 2009 polls, stressed that candidates for Zahle’s municipal council should “emanate from the city’s leaderships and families.” “Zahle cannot have its decision confiscated by outside [political] leaderships, and Zahle residents insist that their decision spring from the city’s residents, families and leadership,” Fattoush said. Following the June 2009 parliamentary elections, controversies emerged between Fattoush and his colleagues after three members of Zahle in the Heart’s bloc joined the parliamentary bloc of the Lebanese Forces. Fattoush also slammed on several occasions Zahle MP Elie Marouni along with his other colleagues for representing their political parties rather than the city of Zahle. Asked about a potential alliance with Skaff, Fattoush said “mutual friends were working on bridging the differences between us.” “I am open to any alliance that serves the interests of Zahle city and boosts its prosperity,” he added.

Geo strategic front

Hariri to discuss Mideast peace process with Top Italian officials

Contradictory statements by the parliamentary minority emerged over the weekend with regard to leaking the deliberations of National Dialogue discussions, as Hizbullah officials reiterated their demand to refrain from debating the national defense strategy in the media.

But Amal Movement MPs stressed that Speaker Nabih Berri’s presentation on a defense strategy was leaked to correct misleading reports about Thursday’s dialogue discussions. Meanwhile, Premier Saad Hariri is scheduled to kick off an official state visit to Italy Monday while President Michel Sleiman is to leave on a state visit to Brazil on Wednesday. Hariri, who arrived in Rome Friday, is to hold talks with top Italian officials Monday about the Mideast peace process and Lebanese-Italian bilateral ties.

Preparing for Hariri’s upcoming visit to Damascus, an official Lebanese delegation tasked with re-evaluating Lebanese-Syrian bilateral deals is to convene Monday before heading to Syria to meet with counterparts.

Headed by Minister of State Jean Hogassapian, the delegation is comprised of the 29 director generals of all government ministries and is to submit to its Syrian counterparts its notes on the reviewed bilateral deals. Hariri is later to ratify the discussed amendments of the existing agreement and ratify new ones if needed. Last week, Syria postponed a meeting between the Lebanese delegation and Syrian officials, saying the meeting was canceled due to the low level of representation of the Lebanese delegation. However, Lebanese officials said the meeting was postponed for technical reasons. Along with talks over bilateral agreements, Hariri is expected to tackle several pending bilateral issues during his upcoming Damascus visit, with the demarcation of the two countries' border topping the agenda.

While the Syrians demand that the process start with the northern Lebanese-Syrian border, given Israeli occupation of part of the Shebaa Farms, the Lebanese parliamentary majority is calling for the process to start with the Shebaa Farms to confirm its Lebanese identity and legitimize, before the international community, demands to liberate it. The UN regards the Shebaa Farms as Syrian rather than Lebanese territory.

Hogassapian, who also heads the committee tasked with coordinating the demarcation process with Syria, is expected to tackle the issue with Syrian officials on Monday.

Meanwhile, Hizbullah and Amal Movement officials called on Monday to adopt Berri's point of view concerning a national defense strategy after Berri's affiliated TV station, NBN, leaked the latter's presentation during Thursday's National Dialogue session.

Health Minister Mohammad Jawad Khalife justified leaking Berri's presentation to the media as a step to boost dialogue against misleading leaks of the meeting's deliberations. Berri's presentation stressed that the Lebanese Army continued to need the resistance to defend Lebanese territory, given Israel's objectives in Lebanon, particularly regarding water resources. Hizbullah and its allies had threatened to withdraw from dialogue if media leaks continued, while demanding that its arms be withdrawn from debate and that discussions be restricted to the defense strategy. "Leaking the information was a clear message to the public aimed at strengthening dialogue ... after misleading leaks on National Dialogue talks and claims of Hizbullah's withdrawal from dialogue," Khalife said. "The most pivotal message by Berri is that Hizbullah's arms have only one role which is to fight the enemy in cooperation with a mini-committee of the Lebanese Army that will reassure [certain parties]," he added. MP Ali Bazzi, a member of Berri's parliamentary bloc, stressed that "we accepted to participate in dialogue to discuss a defense strategy rather than the resistance's arms." Bazzi criticized March 14 Christian leaders without naming them as he questioned motives behind provoking controversies in the media amid Israeli current threats.

But Tyre MP Nawaf Musawi, a Hizbullah official, said dialogue through media outlets would eliminate the need for National Dialogue talks. "If certain parties wish for the National Dialogue to continue, they should commit to restricting debate over a defense strategy within the National Dialogue committee," Musawi said.

Economic front

Lebanon fiscal deficit drops 69.1 percent in first two months

By The Daily Star

Figures released by the Finance Ministry reveal that public finances in the first two months of 2010 exhibited an improvement relative to the same period of 2009, caused

mainly by a significant decrease in total payments along with a slight improvement in total revenues, with the overall budget deficit accounting for 12.0 percent of overall expenditures, relative to 31.7 percent in the first two months of 2009 as reported by Bank Audi's Lebanon Weekly Monitor. The total deficit of February 2010, which amounted to LL265.3 billion (\$177 million), contributed to increase the deficit prevailing at end-January, leading to a total global deficit of LL292.0 billion in the first two months of 2010. However, the deficit of this year's first two months decreased significantly when compared to the deficit of LL943.5 billion in the first two months of 2009, thereby exhibiting a 69.1 percent yearly decline. The aforesaid decrease mainly results from an increase in revenues, a reduction in transfers to Electricite du Liban (EDL), and a small decrease in public debt servicing. On the income front, public revenues which include budget and Treasury receipts, increased by 5.1 percent relative to the same period of 2009, thereby reaching LL2,136.4 billion in the first two months of 2010. Treasury receipts registered a rise from LL94.0 billion to LL125.1 billion. The increase in Treasury receipts was mainly driven by a 55.5 percent growth in guarantees received. As to budget revenues, they edged up by a 3.8 percent to reach LL2,011.4 billion, driven by a rise in tax revenues. Total tax revenues increased by 11.2 percent, due to a year-on-year rise of 9.4 percent in VAT revenues, indicating amelioration in aggregate private consumption, as well as an increase in other tax revenues that went up by 19.9 percent on a yearly basis. The latter taxes incorporate income tax revenues, property registration fees as well as excise revenues. Custom revenues grew by only 2.9 percent over the first two months of 2010 compared to the same period of last year, reflecting a slight rise in receipts from international trade. As for non-tax revenues, they went down by 14.9 percent.

On the spending side, total public expenditures, which include budgetary and Treasury spending, decreased by a yearly 18.4 percent in the first two months of 2010 to reach LL2,428.4 billion, caused mainly by a 51.9 percent decline in Treasury expenditures. Treasury expenditures reached LL524.1 billion in the first two months of 2010, and their decrease is mostly due to a decline of LL318.5 billion, or 47.1 percent in transfers to EDL, which totaled LL357.6 billion. This item constituted the largest share of Treasury expenditures, as it accounted for 68.2 percent of spending. The aforementioned decrease could be attributed to the fact that the government is rationalizing its EDL-related expenditures. In parallel, budgetary expenditures remained almost unchanged at LL1,904.3 billion in the first two months of this year, up by 1.0 percent from the corresponding period last year. This result was due to the fact that the increase in noninterest expenditures was offset by an almost equal decrease in interest payments. Interest payments on domestic and foreign debt, registered a total of LL761.4 billion in the first two months of 2010, down by 3.7 percent relative to the same period of 2009.

This decline was spurred by a year-on-year decrease of 12.2 percent in interest payments on foreign currency debt and a decline of 1.2 percent in interest payments on domestic currency debt. As for principal foreign debt repayment, it amounted to LL19.4 billion in the first two months of 2010, up from LL18.6 billion recorded in the first two months of 2009. Non-interest budgetary spending went up by 4.3 percent year-on-year. As such, with the combination of a decrease in spending and a rise in revenues, the public balance saw a year-on-year decrease in the first two months of 2010, as the global deficit went down by 69.1 percent, and reached LL292.0 billion. When excluding debt service, the first two months of the year witnessed a significant improvement at the level of the

primary balance, which registered a surplus of LL488.8 billion, compared to a deficit of LL134.1 billion in the first two months of 2009, mirroring the decrease in non-debt related expenditures. – The Daily Star

Social front

Mount Lebanon Appeals Court convenes to deliberate nationality case

Daily Star staff

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

Dozens of activists gathered Tuesday in front of the Mount Lebanon Appeals Court in Jdeideh as the court convened to decide whether or not a Lebanese woman could pass her nationality to her children.

The appeals court fixed May 18 as the date to issue its verdict in the case of Samira Soueidan and her contested right to pass her Lebanese nationality to her children. Soueidan, married to an Egyptian, successfully obtained citizenship for her children in June 2009 based on a decision by Jdeideh Judge Jean al-Qazzi. However, the Lebanese Public Prosecutor's Office lodged an appeal, claiming that according to Lebanese law, women can't pass their nationalities to their children. The Mount Lebanon Appeal Court was presided over by Judge Marie Denise al-Maoushi and included judges Sahnajan Hatoum and Yola Slilati. According to the Nationality Law of 1925, Lebanese women married to foreign husbands can't pass their nationality to their children. Soueidan's attorney, Soha Ismail, argued that Lebanese women were not treated equally in their country despite the fact that the Constitution and international treaties guaranteed their rights. She added that Lebanon preferred foreign women over its own citizens since the law allowed foreign women married to Lebanese men to obtain Lebanese nationality within a year, while Lebanese women lacked such a right. Ismail rejected the appeals request by the prosecutor's office, saying the initial verdict was in accordance with the Constitution's Preamble and Article 7. She also demanded that the state pay for the fees of the trial. During the hearing, dozens of women from the women's rights campaign My Nationality: a Right for Me and My Family showed up to support Soueidan. The women held banners demanding their right to pass on their nationality.

"Lebanese women give life but not their nationality," "How can foreign women obtain Lebanese nationality from their husbands, while Lebanese women cannot pass their nationality to their children," some of them read. Soueidan appeared to be very optimistic about the case and anticipated that the appeals court would eventually rule in her favor.

"My nationality is a right for my children who were born and raised in Lebanon. They don't know any other country," she said. Soueidan explained that her deceased Egyptian husband had been buried in Lebanon. Her children have never been to Egypt and have no relatives there. Her daughter Faten Ahmad hoped Judge Maouchi would deliver a fair ruling and would put herself in the mother's shoes. "We'll fight for our nationality till our last breath because we need it. I still believe Lebanon is my country and my identity is Lebanese," Ahmad said. She said her two brothers faced difficulties in their everyday lives, and were unable to find employment. "I might marry a Lebanese man and solve my problem but my brothers' only hope is to obtain a Lebanese nationality," she said.

Mohammad agreed with his sister, and said he could not enroll in university because as a foreigner he had to pay a fee of LL2 million while Lebanese students only paid LL100,000.

Campaign coordinator for My Nationality: a Right for Me and My Family Rola al-Masri urged the judiciary to consider the case an opportunity to show its independence and to guarantee its protection of the people's human rights, especially on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the civil war.

The protesters supported Soueidan in her struggle and also demanded the amendment of the current personal status law.

“If Soueidan succeeds it means we have all taken a huge step toward amending the Nationality Law,” said activist Rita Shemali.

Amnesty International has demanded that Lebanese authorities immediately withdraw the appeal because if approved, the appeal could “shatter hopes of thousands of children born to Lebanese mothers and foreign national fathers.”

Amnesty said certain provisions of the law were discriminatory and asked concerned authorities to “take immediate steps to review existing legislations containing discriminatory provisions against women.”

Over 18,000 Lebanese women are married to non-Lebanese living in Lebanon and their children are considered residents, not citizens, and they are consequently denied access to education and employment.

Christianity to celebrate Annunciation

25 Martie 2010 Information in English

Tomorrow, the Orthodox and Catholic Christians will celebrate the Annunciation, the day when Archangel Gabriel heralded the Holy Virgin Mary that she was chosen to be the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Annunciation is celebrated on March 25 every year, nine months before Christmas. The Christian East celebrates the holiday since 550, while the Catholic Church introduced the celebration in the 7th century. The Annunciation marks the actual incarnation of Jesus Christ – the moment that Jesus was conceived and that the Son of God became the son of the Virgin.

The festival celebrates two things: namely God's action in entering the human world as Jesus in order to save humanity, and the humanity's willing acceptance of God's action in Mary's freely given acceptance of the task of being the Mother of God. On the Annunciation, like on Palm Sunday, Christians may eat fish, and tradition says that who eats fish on this day, will be sound and healthy like a fish, throughout the year.

It is also said that it is on March 25 that the singing birds begin chirping and trilling, and particularly the cuckoo that won't stop till on St. Peter Day, in end June. The cuckoo, a symbol bird sings from the spring equinox till the summer solstice, and it is said that it turns into a hawk from St. Peter Day till the Annunciation when it becomes a cuckoo again.

‘Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God’

March, 25 2010

In both the Christian and Muslim traditions, today is the celebration of the Annunciation, the day an angel spoke to a young Nazareth resident named Mary to tell her that God looked favorably upon her and that she would soon be the mother of a son she should name 'Jesus.' She was surprised, but accepted the responsibility, of course.

In the Bible, the story is told in the first chapter of Luke. The Qur'an tells it twice, in Suras 3 and 19. The celebration of the day falls, conveniently enough, exactly nine months before Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth.

This year, the government of Lebanon declared the Annunciation a national public holiday in honor of Muslim and Christian shared reverence for the Virgin Mary.

Lebanese pursue tolerance and unity

The decision to observe a joint Christian-Muslim day could help to end ethnic and religious violence

Special to Gulf News

March 25, 2010: Today, the Lebanese will observe the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a joint Christian-Muslim Day and though the commemoration is more of a national event than a religious one, its very creation might be an unprecedented event in contemporary history.

Earlier this month, an estimated 500 people were killed in ethnic clashes near the central city of Jos in Nigeria, as Christian and Muslim herdsmen launched reprisals against each other. Such killings are not limited to any geographic location and are often fuelled by social, economic or even territorial conflicts. Still, they take on an especially ugly form when conducted in the name of religious beliefs, which destroy the innocent and permanently scar survivors. What can be done to end ethnic and religious violence?

An answer may be just around the corner, originating in a small but very wealthy country, Lebanon, whose government decreed March 25 a unique national holiday. To be sure, while Lebanon may be known as the "Land of Milk and Honey," its 18 official sects have engaged in dreadful ethnic cleansing over centuries. In that sense, the Lebanese failed to create a nation, tolerating instead a complex and convoluted sense of their multiple identities. Successive leaders inculcated a variety of sentiments, some of which approached nationalism, though much of what passed for patriotism was xenophobic. National holidays filled yearly calendars as Muslim and Christian commemorations received a fairly balanced spread. Sadly, while these celebrations pleased the country's various communities, they seldom created a joint space that united citizens.

Today, the Lebanese will, however, observe the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a joint Christian-Muslim Day and though the commemoration is more of a national event than a religious one, its very creation might be an unprecedented event in contemporary history.

This is an immensely valuable step, affirmed by Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri, who emphasised in his proclamation how the Virgin Mary influenced Muslims and Christians, as amply revealed in their respective scriptures. Indeed, the Quran devotes the 19th Sura to her, which is actually named Maryam (Mary in Arabic). Amazingly, the Virgin's name is mentioned more often in the Quran than in the New Testament and she is considered one of the most righteous women in both traditions. For Roman Catholics, Mary was conceived and born without "Original Sin," which made her sinless and immaculate from

all forms of evil. In Islam, she is the virgin mother of Jesus and in certain passages, referred to as the Qanitah (submissive), Siddiqah (faithful), Raqiyah (prostrated), Tahirah (pure), Nour (enlightened), Waliyah (saintly), and Sa'imah (fasting). There are other names attributed to her as well.

More than a gesture Given this unanimity on Mary's influence, the Lebanese decision to "celebrate the cultural and religious unity between Christians and Muslims," goes beyond the symbolic political gesture and must be assessed as such.

The man who first suggested the holiday was Shaikh Mohammad Nokkari, the general secretary of Dar Al Fatwa [House of Decree], who spoke about it during Annunciation celebrations at the predominantly Maronite Jamhour College a few years ago. Few actually believed that the gap could be closed with such ease, but it was and that fact alone illustrated how men of courage can transform their societies.

Remarkably, the initiative gained momentum after Hares Chehab and Mohammad Sammak, co-chair of the Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee, welcomed the initiative, as did former prime minister Fouad Siniora. Before long, a leading bureaucrat added his voice to Shaikh Nokkari's prayers, when Beirut Mayor Abdul Monhem Ariss responded positively to a request that envisaged the construction of a statue of the Blessed Virgin in front of the National Museum, to be surrounded by a crescent.

Professor John L. Esposito, who heads the Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, in Washington, DC, wrote in his most recent book, *The Future of Islam*, that "The Muslim world is not the only arena for change." He concluded "One of the great ironies of history is that despite our apparent development and sophistication, too often we are bound by our own cognitive and religious ghettos. As the examples of the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, India, Palestine-Israel, America and Europe demonstrate, just because faiths exist in the same country or area, it does not mean that believers come to know much about the other's faith or respect each other."

Lebanon may indeed be such a place and it is remarkable that core principles and values like freedom of speech and of religion, which are espoused by the majority of its citizens, will now be enriched beyond description. Though many Lebanese will enjoy today as a vacation, many others will participate in religious ceremonies in chapels and mosques during which "Christians and Muslims will pray together to the Virgin Mary."

Naturally, this first joint "Christian-Muslim Day" opens a new page in the country's history, hopefully to impart on the Lebanese that the best way to address extremists on both sides of the spectrum is to rejoice at life itself. Importantly, this observance may also be an answer to ethnic violence, perhaps even act as a beacon of hope for people in Jos, Nigeria, as everywhere else, so that ordinary folks learn the real meaning of coexistence.