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## **Summary**

### **Egypt**

Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog, has issued a public call for political change in Egypt ahead of presidential elections planned for next year. ElBaradei, who is seen as a potential candidate for the polls, made the call at a meeting in northeast Egypt, defying an emergency law that bans gatherings critical of the government of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president.

Registration for the mid-term Shura Council elections closed the number of candidates had reached 576. Intessar Nessim, chairman of Cairo's Court of Appeals and president of the Higher Election Commission (HEC), subsequently announced that just 509 of the hopefuls would actually stand, far fewer than the 564 who competed in the last mid-term contest in 2007. Until Sunday, a total of 76 names had been removed from the list, for reasons that ranged from holding dual nationality, not performing military duty, to being implicated in criminal cases. Later on eight more candidates belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, Constitutional and Wafd parties were removed from the list.

Sources have maintained that authorities have ordered the MB candidates to be followed during their campaigns where forces have gone as far as kidnapping and detaining supporters and publicists in broad daylight. The Beheira and Sharqiya governorates have been the latest target of the regime. Forces stormed headquarters while looking for pamphlets or published material which was used for campaigning.

**Emergency laws;** Parliament approves a two-year extension of an amended emergency law despite vociferous objections from opposition and independent MPs, reports

The parliamentary debate last Tuesday over whether or not to extend the state of emergency -- in place since the October 1981 assassination of president Anwar El-Sadat - - was long, lasting for three hours, and far from sweet.

After 29 years of martial law, the government faced with an election and growing unrest extends the order. For a country that's been in a state of emergency for the past 29 years, what's a couple more? That's the stance taken by the country's ruling party this week, when it extended Egypt's controversial emergency law until 2012. *The law grants the authorities power to suspend basic rights, ban demonstrations and detain individuals indefinitely without charge based on national security concerns.* Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif stressed during a speech to parliament that the government was committed to using the powers granted by the emergency law only "to confront the threats of terrorism and narcotics, and only to the extent necessary to confront these dangers." However, human rights activists have been highly vocal in criticizing the Egyptian regime for using the law as a tool for oppression of political opponents. Human rights groups are not convinced the government will start holding to its proposed conditions for enforcement.

Moustafa El-Fiqi, chairman of the People's Assembly's foreign relations committee, lauded the extension of the emergency law in Egypt, saying it allows the government to take proactive measures against terrorism and the trafficking of narcotics. El-Fiqi spoke at a forum with students from the faculty of economics and political science on Thursday. He has also commented on Egypt's largest opposition group, the banned Muslim Brotherhood, saying that it gained its power by taking advantage of Egyptians' piety and using it for their political agenda by appealing to people using religion. The Muslim Brotherhood's golden opportunity came when they won 88 seats at the People's Assembly, he said, adding that they however have not used it wisely. The Muslim Brotherhood has continuously advocated for the abolishment of the emergency law, heightening its campaigns with the increased crackdown on its members.

### **Social issues**

The China-Google kerfuffle received a lot of attention. Now, another Internet technology company and authoritarian government are squaring off. Egypt's National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority said March 13 that it would be blocking Skype's VoIP, or voice over Internet protocol, via mobile phones. Cairo said Skype was violating Egyptian law by providing international calling outside the "approved gateways." Industry monitors have argued that Skype was targeted because the company was eating into the profits of Telecom Egypt, the state-owned landline communication monopoly. But the Skype ban might be about more than profits or bandwidth. Like Gmail, Skype is a preferred communications medium for human rights and political activists, because it is not easily monitored.

**Water issue;** Water poverty and oil wealth are locked into a peculiar relationship in which the abundance of one resource can make up for profligacy with the other. But the assumption on which this relationship is based is ill founded. At some point the oil, or the water, will run out. The designation of entire states--and indeed entire regions--as "oil economies" implies that hydrocarbon exports alone keep these economies afloat. But the oil industry--its machinery, laborers and managers--relies as much upon the steady supply of water as global industry, commerce and consumers do upon oil. Politicians, activists, scholars, public intellectuals, and media commentators have developed a large body of literature on water scarcity in the Middle East.

The Company for Drinking Water and Sewage in the governorate of Beheira and the Drinking Water Authority of the Sudanese Red Sea state signed a joint cooperation agreement seeking to improve water quality and increase water production in the

Sudanese state through Egyptian expertise. The agreement was signed as the Egyptian government is preparing to implement the model used by the Beheira company to purify and treat water throughout Egypt. This implementation model follows the company's successful use of mechanized meter reading systems, payment collection and the development of an innovative pneumatic pump system for water purification.

The Nile is vital for many different reasons Four East African states have signed an agreement to seek more water from the River Nile - a move strongly opposed by Egypt and Sudan. Under colonial-era accords, the two countries get 90% of the river's water. Upstream countries including Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania and Ethiopia say it is unfair and want a new deal but nothing has been agreed in 13 years of talks. A further three countries were represented at the meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, and may sign up later.

Four African countries on Friday signed a new treaty on the equitable sharing of the Nile waters despite strong opposition from Egypt and Sudan who have the lion's share of the river waters. *The Nile provides Egypt with 90% of its water needs.* Rwanda, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania signed the new framework while Kenya issued a support statement, an AFP correspondent reported. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo were not represented at the meeting in the Ugandan town of Entebbe. The upstream countries want to be able to implement irrigation and hydropower projects in consultation with Egypt and Sudan, but without Egypt being able to exercise the veto power it was given by a 1929 colonial-era treaty with Britain. The Nile Basin Initiative, which had been spearheading the talks, will now become the Nile Basin Commission and will receive, review and approve or reject projects related to Africa's longest river.

## **Iraq**

### **Political front**

As bickering over the results of Iraq's March elections turns into horse-trading, the country still has no new government, More than two months after Iraqis went to the polls in the third election to be held in the post-Saddam Hussein era, the nation's divided political and ethnic groups have made little progress towards forming a government after the inconclusive vote in the 7 March parliamentary elections. Worse, various extremist groups, mainly Al-Qaeda in Iraq, have been taking advantage of political differences and carrying out more attacks in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities to create further turmoil. The protracted political wrangling, which comes as Washington prepares to reduce by nearly half US troops in the country by the end of August, has dampened hopes that forming a cross- sectarian alliance might bridge the nation's sharp divides. In a move that might cast new doubt on the process of forming a new government, Iraq's two main Shia groups have formed a parliamentary alliance that is widely believed to be intended to keep the country's Sunni minority marginalised and could spark a new round of sectarian violence. A recount of votes in the Baghdad area has not led to any changes in the final results of the 68 seats in Baghdad districts from the March 7 parliamentary elections. That poll saw former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqi bloc take the most seats with 91 followed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law alliance with 89. There are 325 seats in the Iraqi parliament.

A Sunni militant umbrella organization that includes Al-Qaeda in Iraq has announced that it has selected a new leader. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) has posted information on jihadist websites saying the group's new leader, or emir, is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi.

A senior Iraqi election official says the independent electoral commission will await the results of an appeal by nine disqualified candidates before deciding if they can take their seats, if the seven-member appeals panel upholds the disqualifications made by the Accountability and Justice Commission then the votes of those barred candidates will be distributed to other lists as stipulated by law. He said that would give some factions additional seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives, which has 325 seats.

Good weather conditions will help Iraq reap up to 2 million tons of wheat this year, according to U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Last year grain production declined drastically in the country due to severe drought. The drop in yields turned Iraq into one of the world's largest wheat importers. Last year's wheat produce was in the range of 1 million tons while Iraq's needs are estimated at more than 4 million tons. Iraq's wheat imports just from the U.S. cost the treasury up to \$1.4 billion last year. Iraq's reliance on food imports has increased and widened. The country currently imports vegetables and fruits as well as grains, meat, chicken, legumes, sugar and tea.

### **Social issues**

Lecturers and Muslim students at northern Iraq's Mosul University staged a sit-in to protest deadly attacks against Christian students. A student activist who requested anonymity told that the action is in support of Christian students who have been the victims of bomb attacks and murder. He said the sit-in will end only when measures are taken to ensure the safety of Christians, in particular, and the student body as a whole. A roadside bomb and a car bomb exploded near buses transporting students from the predominantly Christian town of Al-Hamdaniya to Mosul University on May 2.

### **Lebanon**

#### **Political front**

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri will make his first official visit to the United States at the end of May to meet with President Barack Obama and address the UN Security Council, a government official said. "The prime minister will make his first official visit to Washington and New York later this month," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. "He will meet with President Obama and address the UN Security Council." Lebanon currently heads the rotating chair of the UN Security Council. Hariri's five-day visit comes amid mounting concerns in the region of a renewed conflict between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah which fought a devastating war in 2006.

An estimated \$35 million was spent on election-related activities by different political parties in the run-up to the 2009 parliamentary election, a new report released this week by The Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) found. A further \$32 million was spent on political advertising and media in the period from August 2008 and July 2009, the LTA report tackling issues of electoral corruption revealed. The findings come at the end of a year-long Campaign Finance Monitoring Project, the first initiative to monitor campaign spending in the Middle East. It focused on the key election spending abuses, namely the misappropriation of public funds, electoral advertising, vote buying and campaign spending. "We are not here to exclude or get any candidates banned," LTA Project Coordinator, Natacha Sarkis told.

As the municipal election-mania swept across Lebanon, posters and billboards decorating the streets featured a small – yet significant – number of elegantly dressed ladies ready to enter the battlefield. This participation of women in the local polls seemed to be a key feature of progress in the country's public life. Unofficial figures issued by the National

Democratic Institute quantifying women's representation in municipal councils following the first round of elections (i.e. Mount Lebanon) bring the percentage from 2 percent in 2004 to nearly 5.8 percent. This is certainly progress, although I am not quite sure how to describe this progress or the effect it will have on the performance of municipal councils, most of which are plagued with corruption and sleaze, to say the least.

Lebanon said at UN that what holds the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) together and gives it consistency is the guaranteed right to non-nuclear weapon states to develop nuclear technology for peaceful uses. "All indicators are ushering towards a heavier reliance on nuclear energy and nuclear power in the years to come, warranting a greater emphasis on the inalienable right to peaceful uses of nuclear technology especially for developing countries," Salim Baddoura, first secretary and alternate permanent representative to the United Nations in Vienna, said at a meeting here on nuclear technology for peaceful uses.

### **Israel and Palestine**

Israelis and Palestinians have begun indirect peace talks, Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, says. He made the announcement after a meeting on Sunday between George Mitchell, the US Middle East envoy, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in Ramallah in the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. "I can officially declare today that the proximity talks have begun," Erekat said. Mitchell will orchestrate the planned four-month indirect talks in the form of shuttle diplomacy between Israel, Palestinian territories and US.

Palestinian leaders have gathered in the West Bank for a crucial meeting to decide whether to approve the resumption of indirect talks with Israel. Members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's executive committee and officials from the Fatah movement are expected to endorse the move during the meeting in Ramallah.

It comes as the US envoy to the region moves ahead with efforts to secure a deal to restart the stalled talks. George Mitchell, the US special representative to the Middle East, met Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in Ramallah in the West Bank on Friday to discuss the issue.

## **DETAILED NEWS**

### **Egypt**

#### **Political Front**

#### **Elections**

#### **ElBaradei urges Egyptian reforms**

Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog, has issued a public call for political change in Egypt ahead of presidential elections planned for next year. ElBaradei, who is seen as a potential candidate for the polls, made the call at a meeting in northeast Egypt, defying an emergency law that bans gatherings critical of the government of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president. "The state may be a centralised power but the people are stronger," he said on Friday. ElBaradei, who has said

he might stand in the election, urged the crowd of about 700 people to add their names to a petition seeking constitutional change to allow independents to run for president.

"Once we gather as many names as possible we will put it forward and bring about real change," he said. The petition also calls for the emergency law that allows detention without charge and bans anti-government political activity like ElBaradei's public speech to be revoked. "We seek peaceful reform by rallying large numbers of supporters for change. We seek constitutional amendments and free and fair elections," ElBaradei said. "The Egyptian citizen has the right to choose his president."

**Rare political gathering** Egyptian police often break up gatherings of more than five people but Friday's events went ahead without interruption. "We received instructions from the interior ministry to allow the rally and gathering to go smoothly," a security officer at the speech said. The gathering in Mansura, a university town between Cairo and the Mediterranean Sea, drew students dressed in shirts bearing his image, as well as doctors, taxi drivers, engineers and housewives. "Oh, ElBaradei, Egypt wants democracy!" supporters chanted. "There are thousands of alternatives in Egypt, ElBaradei is proof." The crowd sang the national anthem and also chanted, "ElBaradei, say it strongly, Egypt wants democracy". ElBaradei said his aim was to bring as many people as possible to the streets. "What we saw today is the writing on the wall," ElBaradei told the Reuters news agency. "The average Egyptian is out on the street calling for change, and this destroys the myth that this movement is by the elite or is just a virtual one on the internet." Political analysts say the chances of securing constitutional change by next year are remote, with Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party dominating political life in the most populous Arab nation. "The regime is clever this time because it knows that with ElBaradei the rules of the game are different," Yahya Al Gamal, a professor of law professor, told Reuters. "International public opinion is following ElBaradei's every move so the Egyptian government is being smart and behaving in an intelligent way."

**Western policy** Mubarak, 81, who has ruled since 1981, has not said if he plans to run for a sixth six-year term in 2011, but many Egyptians speculate that he will seek to hand power to his son Gamal. Speaking about Western governments support of Mubarak, Elbaradei told Britain's Guardian newspaper on Thursday that their policies towards Arab governments risked encouraging Islamic extremism. "The idea that Bin Laden and company are the only alternative to authoritarian regimes is a fake one," he said. "People feel repressed by their own governments, they feel unfairly treated by the outside world, they wake up in the morning and they see Muslims from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Darfur being shot and killed." "It has not been based on dialogue, understanding, supporting civil society and empowering people, but rather it's been based on supporting authoritarian systems as long as the oil keeps pumping."

### **Silent elections**

Egypt has a unique system for elections. This system is being put to the test in mid-term elections for the Shura Council, as a dress rehearsal, perhaps, for the People's Assembly elections. For days now, candidates have been filing their applications for the Shura elections, but the voting public -- the 30 million or so who are supposed to cast their votes -- have hardly taken notice. As it turned out, the candidates, with rare exceptions, are not publicising their names. They are not running banners in the street. They are not

debating their programmes. They are not trying to win the public over. Obviously, the idea of rivalry hasn't occurred to them. Right now, everyone is waiting to see who the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) is going to name. Everyone knows that NDP candidates end up winning, in many cases in uncontested elections. So how are these candidates selected? They are selected in closed meetings by NDP leaders. The names of the candidates are cleared first in what is called "NDP caucuses", which is to say that all candidates are to be approved by the security services. The whole process, mind numbing as it is, aims to avoid divisions and disputes within the ranks of the NDP. Whether you like it or not, whether the opposition calls it fraud or not, the ruling party is now in control of all constituencies in the country. The candidates fielded by the NDP are the ones who will make it in the elections. Still, the Tagammu and Wafd parties may make a guest appearance, if only for the sake of being granted some of the appointed seats the president is empowered to name. For the above reasons, one should call these elections "silent elections", for none of the candidates are saying anything. And NDP leaders have stopped talking to the public at large, satisfied with talking amongst themselves and to their followers. Independent candidates have no chance. If not imprisoned before the elections, they may be prevented from submitting their applications. These are all tried and tested methods, and there are no guarantees that they won't be employed in the future. The NDP doesn't talk to just anyone these days. It is treating the public in the same way communist parties used to treat their followers. At public rallies of the NDP, whether the speaker is Gamal Mubarak, Ahmed Ezz or others, security is tight, and the audience is made solely of trusted NDP cardholders. As for the content of NDP speeches, it no longer focuses on nationwide issues, but on partisan affairs and issues of a specific nature. It used to be that President Mubarak would meet leaders of the opposition and listen to them, acting as the president of all Egyptians and transcending his partisan status as the NDP leader. This tradition, once an important factor in smoothing up things with the opposition and keeping the nation together, is no longer alive. The NDP seems increasingly inward looking. When Gamal Mubarak has something to say, he often talks to chief editors of the semi-state run newspapers -- the ones the NDP practically appoints, not to journalists from other media. Ahmed Nazif, the prime minister, is now doing the same. He is talking to the semi-official media and ignoring the independents and the partisan press, which speaks for a large chunk of the population, if you ask me. So even when he speaks about things that matter to everyone, there is something missing; there is an attitude of uncompromising partisanship unseen anywhere else in the world. No wonder people have so little faith in government policies. No wonder many see the elections as an exercise in futility.

### **The sure path**

The convictions that have underpinned three decades of President Mubarak's rule remain in place, writes **Dina Ezzat** In force since the assassination of president Anwar El-Sadat, the emergency laws have been renewed yet again, though the government has pledged, in line with promises made by some NDP leaders, that extraordinary powers will be invoked only in cases involving drug trafficking and terror. The latter, though, remains ill-defined.

*Al-Ahram Weekly* sources say that President Hosni Mubarak himself was convinced by his aides -- both political and security affiliated --that it would be hazardous to cancel

the emergency laws given the threat posed by "traditional and new" internal security concerns. The renewal of the emergency measures had been expected following a recent, high-level NDP meeting that promised "some restrictions" in the application of the controversial -- some human right activists would argue notorious -- laws. The extension of the state of emergency, in one form or another, was trailed in a speech delivered by President Mubarak last Thursday to mark Labour Day. During the 30-minute speech, the first of its kind since the president had surgery to remove his gall bladder on 6 March, Mubarak warned that current manifestations of political and social opposition would not be allowed to develop in a way that might open the door to "wide disorder". Mubarak's Labour Day speech reiterated the argument the president made in his speech on Sinai Liberation Day during the last week of April, crediting the current state of political expression to his "initiative for political reforms" presented and put into effect in 2005, including constitutional amendments that allowed for Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential elections and introducing some changes criticised by the opposition, not least the suspension of direct judicial supervision of elections and restrictions on the eligibility of candidates for the presidency. In his Labour Day speech the president chose to neither ignore, nor give close attention to, the growing number of protests by workers who feel they are losing out economically or being victimised by relentless privatisation. He made some general promises, including "always taking the side of workers against all those who try to undermine their rights", and said he would push for legislation to secure the right of workers whose companies are privatised, and others facing unemployment. He also reassured retired workers and civil servants that, under new social security rules, their retirement packages would be more generous. He declined, however, to promise the kind of pay increases that striking workers were hoping for. "Any increase in salaries is possible only if it is matched by a similar increase in productivity," said Mubarak. "Otherwise the increase would be swallowed by the inflation it causes." The most striking note sounded in Mubarak's speech last Thursday was the hints it contained that the president has no intention of stepping aside to make way for his son, Gamal, to succeed him. "Today, as a citizen, I find myself more determined and more convinced than ever before that I must keep on and move forward," he said. The quote, which flew in the face of speculation, both at home and abroad, that Gamal is Egypt's president-in-waiting, made the headlines of pro- and anti-government papers. Invariably it was interpreted that Mubarak, who became president in October 1981, intends to stand as the NDP candidate in the presidential poll scheduled for October 2011.

Some sources from the executive and within NDP quarters insist this is the case, while others qualify it as the case "so far". Yet a third group maintains that this is simply the impression the NDP is seeking to give in order to divert public attention from ongoing efforts to groom Gamal Mubarak for the presidential post.

The majority of those who spoke to the *Weekly* belonged to the first group. Their arguments varied from the assessment that it would be "unlike" Mubarak to pass on the presidency to his son to suggestions that the president is the first to know how difficult it is to run a country with a population of 83 million, limited economic resources, modest

development rates, endemic corruption, and foreign challenges that could well include a cut in Egypt's share of Nile water.

The opposition seems to share the same view and the much touted succession scenario seems to be on the wane. Again, the arguments vary. Some suggest that the president has been convinced by his closest aides that he is the only person capable of facing up to the challenges posed by untraditional opposition quarters, especially those championing the candidacy of Mohamed El-Baradei, former chair of the International Agency for Atomic Energy, who is leading a limited but expanding national movement for constitutional amendments that seeks to bring fully-fledged democracy to Egypt.

"El-Baradei changed the equation" and "El-Baradei gave a blow to the scenario of succession", they say.

Speculation that 47-year-old Gamal would succeed his father began when he was appointed head of the NDP's powerful "Policies Committee", an influential body in formulating not only government policies but also in deciding who will implement them. Gamal Mubarak's subsequent promotion to the post of assistant secretary-general of the NDP was seen by some as one more step towards Egypt's top office.

Gamal Mubarak is a member of the NDP's 45-member Higher Council, from which the party must choose its presidential candidate.

The scenario of succession was frequently denied by the president and his son. Over the past two months, though, according to both pro- and anti-succession observers, it has become increasingly unlikely, though some sources suggest it may only have been put on hold and could be resuscitated if "influential quarters" within the regime, the ruling party and certainly the powerful business community, have their say.

But for the time being it seems clear that the old-guard enjoys the upper hand. They insist that Mubarak, health permitting, should run for a sixth term next year, when he would be 83 years old. A simple and not very festive observation of the president's 82nd birthday is said to have taken place, with the presidential family comforted by improvements in Mubarak's health eight weeks after surgery, and the presence of a first grand-daughter, Farida Gamal Mubarak, but still grieving the loss of Mubarak's eldest and favourite grandson, Mohamed Alaa Mubarak, who passed away on 18 May last year.

So far Mubarak has spent 60 of his 82 years in public service. He began his career in the Air Forces, was eventually promoted to chief of the Air Forces and appointed vice-president by president Anwar El-Sadat in 1975.

Colleagues who knew Mubarak as a young officer confirm what the president himself has said in several press interviews, that he never entertained high political ambition. Indeed, during his first term in office Mubarak promised to amend the constitution to remove the prerogative introduced by Sadat allowing for a lifetime presidency. The

promise was not kept, allegedly due to the advice of aides who argued that internal and regional security conditions in the wake of the dramatic assassination of Sadat and the then controversial peace agreement between Egypt and Israel mitigated against it.

During close to three decades in office Mubarak has, as supporters and opponents attest, exhibited considerable discipline, even if he chooses, for one reason or another, to exercise a certain degree of tolerance towards signs of inefficiency or worse. Certainly he has made continuing efforts to stress his affiliation with the middle classes and to promise support for the economically disadvantaged.

Unlike Sadat, Mubarak has never been photographed walking a dog or smoking a pipe. His demeanour is composed and there are no eye-catching cuff links or flagrantly elegant suits such as those sported by Sadat.

But as sociologist Galal Amin and economist Ahmed Sayed El-Naggar have argued in books on the rule of Mubarak, when it comes to policies the president has deviated little from the guidelines set by his predecessor: Egypt is still a keen ally of the US, despite the cold alliance years during the second administration of George W Bush, marked by American pressure on human rights and democracy issues; Egypt is still fully committed to its peace treaty with Israel and has generously expanded the interpretation of the clauses of this agreement to include unprecedented forms of security arrangements and economic cooperation, though Mubarak has never been to Israel except to attend the 1995 funeral of Yitzhak Rabin, assassinated by an anti-peace extremist; Egypt has also implemented and upgraded Sadat's open door economic policies.

Since becoming president, Mubarak has retained a small circle of advisors. His closest aides have remained the same, whatever changes that have been made were due mainly to the decease of some and the retirement of others. And, says one insider, it is "ultimately to those aides that have long served with the president" that he listens when he needs advice. The choice of the NDP candidates for the mid-term Shura Council elections is a good example of the confidence Mubarak has in his old staff over the new political team that surrounds Gamal Mubarak.

"I am not in favour of electric shock policies," Mubarak said during his first weeks in office. Over 28 years as president of the republic and chief of the Armed Forces he has grown no fonder of the kind of political U-turns that characterised the rule of his predecessor.

Political scientist Hassan Abu Taleb, the long-term editor of the annual report monitoring domestic and foreign developments issued by Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, likes to divide Mubarak's presidency into three stages.

The first phase, says Abu Taleb, was during the 1980s, when Mubarak focussed on consolidating Egypt's foreign relations, especially with Arab countries that had boycotted Sadat over his unilateral peace deal with Israel, as well as on the negotiations that would lead to Sinai being returned to Egypt following its occupation by Israel.

On the home front, Abu Taleb argues, Mubarak spent the first decade of his rule opening up to the political forces with which Sadat had entered into confrontation. Mubarak also sought to defuse tensions between Muslims and Copts.

The second phase, the 1990s, was dominated by economic reforms while the third, which started immediately after 9/11, with the US war on terror and subsequent occupation of Iraq, has seen Mubarak return to earlier concerns, the pressing demand by the opposition for more substantive political reforms and policies more attentive to social equity.

The president is clearly making efforts to assure all concerned, at home and abroad, that he is up to the tasks ahead. And in an uncertain world at least one thing is sure, that he will tackle them in the manner he has always tackled challenges, with no sudden changes and no unexpected turns.

### **Shura campaigns kick off**

Competition for seats on the Shura Council could be intense after large numbers of opposition and Muslim Brotherhood candidates register, **Gamal Essam El-Din** reports

By the time registration for the mid-term Shura Council elections closed on Sunday the number of candidates had reached 576. Intessar Nessim, chairman of Cairo's Court of Appeals and president of the Higher Election Commission (HEC), subsequently announced that just 509 of the hopefuls would actually stand, far fewer than the 564 who competed in the last mid-term contest in 2007. Until Sunday, a total of 76 names had been removed from the list, for reasons that ranged from holding dual nationality, not performing military duty, to being implicated in criminal cases. Moreover, Nessim later announced on Tuesday that eight more candidates belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, Constitutional and Wafd parties were removed from the list.

Nessim disclosed that during the first three days of registration, between 5 and 7 May, just 346 had been put forward."On Sunday, the last day of registration 230 candidates came forward, pushing the total to 576."Nessim expects that the number of eligible candidates will be further reduced after the window for appeals and complaints closes next Sunday."Specialised judicial panels will take charge of scrutinising appeals filed against candidates and by next week we should be in a position to publish a final list," says Nessim. If everything goes according to plan, Shura election campaigns should be able to kick off by the middle of next week. The elections will be held in 67 districts across all governorates, with the exception of Ismailia and Al-Wadi Al-Gadid, and result in the return of 88 deputies. Twenty-one districts will elect two deputies, with the remaining 46 districts choosing a single representative. The majority of last day registrations belong to the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Observers agree that the last-minute registration of NDP candidates was a deliberate tactic, aimed at preventing members not selected from running independently. On Sunday morning, the NDP's Safwat El-Sherif met with party chairman President Hosni Mubarak to present him with a final list of NDP candidates. "Those standing were selected democratically by the party's internal electoral colleges and opinion polls," said El-Sherif, adding that

"President Mubarak had ordered that the HEC be given free rein in supervising the elections." A total of 600 NDP members, said El-Sherif, competed to win the party's official nomination. "However," El-Sherif explained, "the party decided to select just 92 candidates to compete in 88 districts." Four districts, one each in the governorates of Marsa Matrouh, Aswan, the Red Sea and Gharbiya, will see NDP affiliated candidate in competition. "The NDP decided to field two candidates in each of these four districts," said El-Sherif, "and they will have to compete to win seats." The party's official list of candidates includes 35 new faces. It also includes three Coptic candidates, one cabinet minister (Minister of Religious Endowments Hamdi Zaqzouq) and one woman. Ahmed Ezz, the NDP secretary for organisational affairs, met with Pope Shenouda on 4 May. Ezz said that during the two and a half hour meeting he told Pope Shenouda that, "the NDP is very keen that its list of candidates for elections includes Copts. It is part of our strategy to strengthen the principle of citizenship and encourage Copts to participate more actively in political life." The biggest surprise about the nominations has been the registration of 14 candidates belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Three of the 14 are already members of the People's Assembly. Nessim indicated that the HEC had intervened to enable as many as 14 independents (most of them are believed to be Brotherhood nominees) to register. Members of the People's Assembly, he explained, are legally allowed to run in Shura Council elections. The majority of Brotherhood candidates are slated to run in the governorate of Alexandria and the Nile Delta governorates of Gharbiya, Beheira, Daqahliya, Qalioubiya and Sharqiya. Essam El-Erian, a leading Brotherhood official, says the outlawed group exploited the fact that some of its members enjoy parliamentary immunity to ask them to register for the Shura elections. "Their parliamentary immunity allowed them to escape arrest and other arbitrary security measures," said El-Erian. El-Erian affirmed that the Brotherhood's long-term slogan "Islam is the solution" will be adopted during the campaign, in spite of warnings that HEC will ban any religious slogans. The Muslim Brotherhood has faced a harsh crackdown in recent months, with El-Erian and Mahmoud Ezz, the deputy supreme guide, both being detained. In the last Shura Council mid-term elections the Brotherhood fielded 19 candidates, none of whom won. The final list also includes 128 party-based candidates, representing 13 legal parties. "This includes 88 NDP candidates and 40 candidates from 12 parties," said Nessim, "with the remaining candidates standing as independents." The liberal-oriented Wafd Party and leftist Tagammu are fielding 23 candidates. The *Al-Ahram* analyst Amr Elshobky believes that, "the initial list of candidates suggests that the Shura elections this year could be competitive." "We can only hope that Brotherhood and opposition names are not removed from the list of candidates before the polls open, that the security forces do not interfere in elections and that the HEC supervises the entire process, from beginning to end."

### **Egypt's transparent elections continue by kidnapping campaigners**

Saturday, May 5, 2010 Sources have maintained that authorities have ordered the MB candidates to be followed during their campaigns where forces have gone as far as kidnapping and detaining supporters and publicists in broad daylight. The Beheira and Sharqiya governorates have been the latest target of the regime. Forces stormed headquarters while looking for pamphlets or published material which was used for campaigning. The kidnappings are an attempt by the regime to force independent

candidates running to withdraw from the elections last-minute. In a statement to 'Ikhwanweb', running candidate for the Beheira constituency Mohamed Alzayat, ascertained that these illegitimate arrests and detentions will not deter the Muslim Brotherhood from continuing their peaceful struggle and call for political reform. He continued "On the contrary it only proves that the regime, with its Interior Ministry lacks the ability to follow through with the allegations that the elections will be free and fair. Although there are no guarantees that the authorities will not continue employing these suppressive measures against free citizens, we the Muslim Brotherhood bloc, will continue urging for modifications and continue participating in elections and calling for the freedom of rights of all Egyptian citizens stipulated in the constitution".

### **Egyptian MP starts hunger strike**

The Egyptian Gazette Sunday, May 16, 2010

An independent MP started a hunger strike on Sunday in protest against the Parliament's initial approval of a bill revamping constituencies, thereby abolishing his electoral district. "I have collected thousands of signatures from residents in the areas I represent. You should have reviewed them," MP Moustafa Bakri told members of the Parliament Legislative Committee who endorsed controversial bill minutes before his appearance Sunday. The MP got angry and shouted at the committee members saying: "it seems you are acting in a sham play". "All these attempts to steal my constituency will fail. I will never leave even if I have been shot to death," Bakri fumed. The proposed law will abolish Helwan and Tibin constituency and merge it into Maadi, where a Cabinet minister from the ruling party is standing for a seat in the Parliament. This would make Bakri's chances of getting a seat in the new Parliament very slim. Residents in Bakri's constituency have recently held several protests outside the Parliament against the decision and threatened to start an open protest. Bakri blamed Ahmed Ezz, a senior official of the ruling party, for trying to exclude him for some tit-for-tat reasons. However, he did not give more details. Bakri used to embarrass the Government by his parliamentary questions on substandard wheat and the use of sewerage water for irrigation. The proposed changes triggered a similar protest in the Giza governorate's area of Al-Warraq on Friday when angry protesters closed the Cairo Ring Road, asking for their constituency to remain unchanged.

### **Emergency laws**

#### **Pruning emergency**

Parliament approves a two-year extension of an amended emergency law despite vociferous objections from opposition and independent MPs, reports Gamal Essam El-  
The parliamentary debate last Tuesday over whether or not to extend the state of emergency -- in place since the October 1981 assassination of president Anwar El-Sadat -  
- was long, lasting for three hours, and far from sweet. It was, however, well-orchestrated by the government and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), whose MPs endorsed the extension by 308 votes. Opposition MPs were alerted to the possibility of the debate on Saturday, 8 May, when the national daily Al-Gomhuriya reported that Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif would address parliament on national security issues on Tuesday. Nazif had already told the editors of national newspapers that a list of

guarantees would be provided to ensure emergency powers be confined to fighting terrorism and drug-trafficking crimes. Most newspapers -- national and independent -- appeared on Tuesday morning with front page stories announcing that the People's Assembly would be asked to vote on a two-year extension of the emergency law the same day. The opposition quickly mobilised. Muslim Brotherhood MP Hamdi Hassan told Al-Ahram Weekly that, "the opposition was expecting the extension request anytime, and the press headlines gave it a sufficient time to plan a counter-offensive." Opposition and independent MPs arrived at the People's Assembly wearing red and white sashes on which were written slogans, including "no to the state of emergency" and "emergency violates rights and is an abuse of freedoms". In a statement submitted to assembly speaker Fathi Sorour, opposition and independent MPs said "the extension of the emergency law is not a solution to Egypt's problems... The solution is to change policies, instruments and persons". There was, however, little sign of a united front between opposition and independent MPs. Brotherhood MPs appeared angriest, with Mohamed El-Beltagui, an Ain Shams university professor and MP, having to be taken to Al-Qasr Al-Aini hospital for treatment after he collapsed. Secular independent and opposition MPs, belonging to the Wafd and Tagammu, were well aware that NDP MPs would dominate the session and approve the extension. Mahmoud Abaza, leader of the Wafd Party, and Mohamed Abdel-Aziz Shaaban, representative of the leftist Tagammu, were calm and logical in their arguments against the extension. Both based their case on the extension being a blow to civil liberties and individual freedoms. A group of between 100-200 demonstrators, mostly belonging to the dissent movement Kifaya, staged a protest in front of the assembly's main entrance, chanting slogans. The burden of organising the three-hour debate fell on Speaker Sorour's shoulders. Sorour was taken to Qasr El-Aini hospital following the end of the meeting after he felt pain and exhaustion. NDP leaders had called on Monday night for an emergency meeting with MPs the following morning when, says Ahmed Ezz, NDP secretary for organisational affairs and chairman of the assembly's Budget Committee, the party's MPs were told to speak their minds freely but when it came to voting they were asked to put their differences aside and endorse the extension. Nazif began reading the extension request at 12.45pm. With his face directed towards NDP MPs sitting on the right, he said that "when the government requested an extension of the state of emergency it committed itself to restricting the powers solely to cases involving terrorism." "Some," Nazif continued, "doubted the sincerity of that commitment. The president sought to dispel any doubts by including in his request for an extension restrictions on the application of the use of emergency powers so they be invoked only in cases involving terrorist threats and the financing of drug-trafficking." Moreover, added Nazif, measures that may be taken to preserve public security and order will be "limited to those listed in paragraphs 1 and 5 of Article 3 of the emergency law". Nazif, however, faced shouts from Brotherhood MPs who chanted "battel" (invalid), forcing Sorour to ask Brotherhood MPs "to respect the dignity of parliament". Following Nazif's 45-minute statement the assembly adjourned for an hour and half, allowing the General Committee (which includes the speaker, his two deputies, the chairmen of 19 parliamentary committees and representatives of the opposition and independent MPs) to examine the extension request. A report, prepared by the committee which recommended approving the extension, argued that since 2005, when President Mubarak promised that an anti-terror law would replace the emergency law, new factors

had emerged. The report cited terrorist acts and regional conflicts in the Middle East to justify extending the state of emergency. "The government has promised this time that the application of emergency powers will be restricted to terrorist and drug- trafficking crimes," said the report. "It has also promised that procedures fall completely under judicial supervision." The debate then reconvened, with opposition members shouting "no to the state of emergency", and NDP MPs shouting back "no to terrorism". Speaker Sorour allowed 35 deputies, from across the political spectrum, to speak on the motion. Mustafa El-Feki, NDP chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, argued that "Egypt is being targeted by external and internal conspiracies and that the extension is intended not to restrict political activities but to fight terrorism and drug-trafficking. Saad El-Katatni, spokesman of Muslim Brotherhood, insisted that the emergency law would be used to rig the next parliamentary elections while opposition MP Mohamed El-Omda, insisted that "the state of emergency is used more to protect the NDP regime than to secure Egypt from terrorism". Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Moufid Shehab intervened, arguing that many countries in the region, including Israel, are living in a state of emergency. Security forces, he disclosed, had foiled several terrorist crimes in the last two years. "Such crimes have been kept secret till now but it is time they were made public," said Shehab, citing a July 2009 case when a group of 42 terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda were caught plotting terrorist acts in Alexandria, Cairo and Helwan, and the use of emergency powers to foil plans to use Egypt as a base for acts of terror by the Shia party Hizbullah. Shehab also pointed out that anyone detained under the emergency laws can go to the courts after a month to ask to be released should they not be implicated in terrorist or drug-trafficking crimes. Joining forces with Shehab, Sorour told MPs that "anyone detained under the emergency laws for non-terrorist and non-drug- trafficking crimes would be automatically released after the end of the current extension at the end of this month, meaning that, as Al-Ahram 's headline said today, the emergency laws, with their sweeping powers, have all but been revoked." Sorour and Shehab's arguments were sufficiently convincing that opposition and independent MPs were finally quiet. Counting the votes took just 14 minutes, after which it was announced that 308 MPs, out of a total of 454, were in favour of the extension, which will extend to 31 May, 2012.

#### ***Changes in the law***

- Arrest and detention of people suspected of being involved in crimes of terrorism and narcotics trafficking
- Searching of people or places suspected in involvement of such crimes
- Cancellation of licences to bear arms or own explosive material, and the right to confiscate them

#### **Off limits**

- Government monitoring of all forms of communication
- Censoring and confiscation of media and publications
- Closure of publishing houses and broadcast stations
  - Evacuation and isolation of certain areas

#### **A question of exigency**

The decision on Tuesday to extend the emergency law for two more years literally opened a Pandora's box. At home, the case for political renewal is irrefutable. There are those who see the watered-down version of the extended law as part of the averred political reform and those who see it as a setback. How do the rival political factions, therefore, measure up to this prospectus? All parties believe that they are right on their perspective on civil liberties. The debate that erupted in parliament and in the media as well as in foreign capitals revealed the wide gap between those who viewed the move positively and those who dismiss it both at home and abroad. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif maintained that as much as the government disliked the state of emergency it was "obliged" to request an extension until May 2012. While members of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) termed the measure as "revolutionary", independent dailies such as *Al-Masry Al-Yom* and *Al-Shorouk* described it respectively as "a new look" and "cosmetic". "This law is a blow to civil liberties and stripping Egypt of becoming a truly civilian state because it gives sweeping powers to police forces," warned Mohamed El-Beltagui, Muslim Brotherhood affiliated MP. Nasserist Karama Party MP Hamdeen Sabahi tritely called it the "lesser of two evils" though he omitted defining each of the "evils". Ironically Washington's tepid "disappointment" with the measure is not far from Sabahi's. International human rights organisations also deplored the development. Amnesty International sounded the alarm bell, stressing that it "deplores Tuesday's renewal of the state of emergency. Egypt's decision, it claims, "authorises giving the security forces especially the State Security Intelligence officials carte blanche to continue using the repressive emergency powers that have led to numerous abuses." Human Rights Watch decried the extension of the emergency laws, arguing that Egypt "breaches again its 2005 promise. Instead of cosmetic changes to the emergency law, the government needs to repeal it and restore the basic laws of its citizens." Given that this high-minded intervention is well-intentioned, officials of the ruling National Democratic Party noted, it comes at a time when Western nations are themselves intensifying their anti-terrorism precautions and stiffening the legal and security measures to counter terrorism. "The reaction of the US has gone astray," thundered Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit. Other top-level officials concurred. "This time round, the detractors of the country have no credible excuse whatsoever. They have a lame excuse. The new emergency laws are limited to terrorism and drug trafficking. Nothing more, nothing less. Egypt's emergency laws are therefore in line with the anti-terrorism laws in force in most Western nations," Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the People's Assembly Mustafa El-Feki told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. El-Feki said, "although US President Barack Obama vowed that the Guantanamo Bay detention centre would be closed, he has not been able to do so until now and America is even taking more preemptive measures to face terrorism." In much the same vein as local opposition groups, the United States expressed criticism of the move. "The US is disappointed by the Egyptian government's decision to extend the state of emergency which has been in effect continuously since 1981, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said in a statement on Tuesday. "We call on the Egyptian government to fulfil its pledge to the Egyptian people to replace the emergency law with a counter-terrorism law that protects the civil liberties of Egyptian citizens," Gibbs added. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton concurred noting that, "a broad range of Egyptian voices" is seeking an end to the emergency laws. That, she said, "would be a step forward if it means greater

protection of civil liberties for Egyptian citizens in practice," Clinton added. "We urge Egypt to complete its promised counter-terrorism legislation on an urgent basis and repeal the state of emergency." Within parliament there was a tsunami of conflicting reactions. "As for local human rights groups and opposition parties, they never stop making political capital out of the defaming of the country abroad," El-Feki concluded. "The subject itself is banal and deflects attention from the far more pertinent concerns gripping the country and the entire region," Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the dean of Arab political commentary, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "The issue of the emergency laws is an aside, a distraction from the critical concerns of the nation. The emergency laws have been with us for the past 29 years. They have been regularly renewed, so what is new? What is the fuss in the media all about? The United States knows exactly what is going on in Egypt. It has turned a blind eye to the situation in the country and so it is rather puzzling that it feigns concern now," Heikal extrapolated. "The whole discourse concerning the state of emergency is a non-issue. It is tedious and wearisome. This has been a recurrent and verbose farce, an inconsequential rant of the sensationalist media for nearly three decades now," Heikal explained.

### **El-Fiqi hails emergency law extensions**

What's This ? May 14, 2010, Moustafa El-Fiqi, chairman of the People's Assembly's foreign relations committee, lauded the extension of the emergency law in Egypt, saying it allows the government to take proactive measures against terrorism and the trafficking of narcotics. El-Fiqi spoke at a forum with students from the faculty of economics and political science on Thursday. He has also commented on Egypt's largest opposition group, the banned Muslim Brotherhood, saying that it gained its power by taking advantage of Egyptians' piousness and using it for their political agenda by appealing to people using religion. The Muslim Brotherhood's golden opportunity came when they won 88 seats at the People's Assembly, he said, adding that they however have not used it wisely. The Muslim Brotherhood has continuously advocated for the abolishment of the emergency law, heightening its campaigns with the increased crackdown on its members. "While all political opposition factions, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have united in the call to eliminate the emergency law, authorities have unceasingly continued to implement it. The prolonged oppression by the ruling regime against the people and in particular innocent members of the MB illustrates that it is incapable of adhering to the so-called democracy it boasts," member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Office and the group's spokesman, Mohamed Morsi said. "The regime's repression is intolerable and will only result in further unrest and instability. The continued practice of emergency law is unconstitutional and civil liberties are being violated by the authorities, which is unacceptable," he added. Prosecutor General Abdel Meguid Mahmoud referred five prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood to the State Security Emergency Court last month for allegedly funding a banned group. Muslim Brotherhood lawyer, Abdel Moneim Abdel Maqsoud, said, "This illustrates how the emergency law is used against scholars and intellectuals in contrast to the government's claim of using it only against terrorists and drug dealers." In a recent interview with CNN's Christina Amanpour, when asked about the emergency law, leading member of the National Democratic Party, Ahmed Ezz, said, "In this heightened

level of security awareness in the world, every country is grappling with how better to protect its citizens, including Egypt, and it has always been controversial. You have your patriot act. Our emergency law is our patriot act.” “It has only and exclusively been used to either combat terror or to avert the threat of terror. In no way has it been used to suppress either political or social or economic life,” he added, saying that the emergency law can only be lifted when the Middle East is at peace with itself.

### **Egypt's never-ending state of emergency**

After 29 years of martial law, the government — faced with an election and growing unrest — extends the order. For a country that's been in a state of emergency for the past 29 years, what's a couple more? That's the stance taken by the country's ruling party this week, when it extended Egypt's controversial emergency law until 2012. The law grants the authorities power to suspend basic rights, ban demonstrations and detain individuals indefinitely without charge based on national security concerns. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif stressed during a speech to parliament that the government was committed to using the powers granted by the emergency law only “to confront the threats of terrorism and narcotics, and only to the extent necessary to confront these dangers.” However, human rights activists have been highly vocal in criticizing the Egyptian regime for using the law as a tool for oppression of political opponents. Human rights groups are not convinced the government will start holding to its proposed conditions for enforcement. President Hosni Mubarak, who recently celebrated his 82 birthday amid speculation about his health and any clear succession plan, vowed in 2005 — during the height of United States' efforts to promote democracy in the Arab world — to replace Egypt's emergency law with new counterterrorism legislation. “President Mubarak has again breached his promise of five years ago to end emergency rule,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The cosmetic changes announced this week don't change the fact that the state of emergency perpetuates official lawlessness and contempt for basic civil and political rights.” Egypt isn't the only country in the Middle East with long-drawn-out official emergency status. Syria has been in a state of emergency since 1963, and Algeria since 1992. Egypt's current emergency law was enacted immediately following the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, and according to Nazif, “the rationale for its declaration [has] persisted.” U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Egypt's decision to prolong the emergency law, “regrettable,” but did not step too hard on the toes of America's second largest recipient of aid money. “The United States understands the challenges that terrorism poses to free societies and we believe that effective counterterrorism measures can be based on legal principles that protect the rights of all citizens,” she said in a State Department statement. The Egyptian government was keen to play off the comparison to the United States' counterterrorism initiatives. It likened its decision to uphold the state of emergency to President Barak Obama's failed promise to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility by the January 2010 deadline.

“Though President Obama signed an executive order to close the facility by the end of 2009, the administration has been unable to do so due to the complexity of the two challenges faced by the administration regarding this matter,” Nazif said to parliament.

Political analysts, however, think it's no surprise that the government should not want to loosen up now: National elections are looming in the near future and rumors continue to circulate questioning the health of Mubarak after he underwent gallbladder surgery in Germany in March.

Opposition to the Mubarak regime received a new boost last December, after Mohamed Elbaradei — the former head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog and a Noble Prize recipient — announced he might run in Egypt's 2011 presidential election against the ruling party.

"I believe that [the emergency law extension] has a link with the coming parliamentary elections this year and the presidential election in 2011. I think this is very critical phase for the regime," said Hala Mustafa, editor of the political journal Democracy, who also cited a growing protest movement and Islamic opposition within the country.

Protesters from the political spectrum joined together to demonstrate outside parliament on Tuesday — one of a number of recent protests, and unusual in the country — after it was announced that the emergency law would be renewed. The group of about 100 surrounded on all sides by riot police held signs with a picture of a skeleton labeled "the Egyptian people" sitting at the bottom of a noose labeled "the emergency."

"They try to make the Egyptian people scared through the state of emergency," said Sayed Gouda, 55, who used to belong to the liberal-leaning Al-Ghad political party. "I have children, boys and girls. I want my children to live in a free country in the future."

### **Egypt: State Security Emergency Courts to try MB in absentia**

Sunday, May 5, 2010 Egypt's Emergency State Security Court decided to begin the trial of four Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in July on charges of "affiliation to and fundraising for a banned group, the MB."

The Islamic Human Rights Council (IHRC) said that Egyptian State Security Prosecutor Hesham Badawi, "cleared the confusion" between mixing the names of the Saudi Arabian Preacher Aaidh al-Qarni's and Awad Mohamed al-Qarani, who is the actual defendant. Aaidh al-Qarni (the mistakenly accused) denied all charges. Dr. Osama Soliman, who is still in prison despite the court's release order issued six months ago, will be the only defendant present in the case. Three other MB members, Dr. Ashraf Abdel Ghaffar, Ibrahim Moneer and preacher Wagdi Ghoneim who are accused in the "international network" case will be tried in absentia. The 'international network' case was closed and reopened six months later after all defendants were cleared and acquitted by the court as no evidence was brought forward. Emergency Laws imposed since 1981 and used against political activists, have given the authorities the mandate to haul in political activists without warrants and to detain the group's members indefinitely. Egypt's State of Emergency was extended in Egypt on May 11 for a further two years. The IHRC said that it is "believed that the reason behind these charges is to cut all aid supporting Gaza so that Hamas accepts the terms and conditions of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement." According to the London-based group, this would result in "further restrictions on Hamas as the two chambers elections approach."

### **Social issues**

#### **Public Prosecutor orders detainment of 60 Gezirat Mohamed residents**

The public prosecution office has ordered that 60 people be detained following clashes between security forces and residents of Cairo's Gezirat Mohamed and Tanash areas. The clashes occurred on Friday when some 3,000 people blocked Cairo's Ring Road. The crowd had been taking part in a demonstration against a prime ministerial decision to make the areas subject to the governorate of Sixth of October instead of Giza, in administrative matters. Clashes between protestors and security forces reportedly resulted in minor injuries. A YouTube video shows what appears to be teargas being used in what the video's author says is Gezirat Mohamed. A total of 65 people were arrested following the clashes. Five were released on Saturday while the remaining group of 60 were remanded in custody for four days during investigation into charges of taking part in an illegal gathering, causing injury to a police officer and incitement. On Sunday the group of 60 defendants were scheduled to appear before the North Cairo Court for an administrative procedure related to their detention. This however was postponed until Sunday, and moved to the South Cairo Court. Activist Walid El-Sayyed told Daily News Egypt that "no reason" was given for the postponement.

### **Egypt's Skype ban about politics**

May 13, 2010 The China-Google kerfuffle received a lot of attention. Now, another Internet technology company and authoritarian government are squaring off. Egypt's National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority said March 13 that it would be blocking Skype's VoIP, or voice over Internet protocol, via mobile phones. Cairo said Skype was violating Egyptian law by providing international calling outside the "approved gateways." Industry monitors have argued that Skype was targeted because the company was eating into the profits of Telecom Egypt, the state-owned landline communication monopoly. But the Skype ban might be about more than profits or bandwidth. Like Gmail, Skype is a preferred communications medium for human rights and political activists, because it is not easily monitored. With Egypt's 2011 presidential election on the horizon and the enormous impact it could have on politics, the Skype ban looks to be part of a broader effort to curtail activists and their links outside Egypt. Just as China has sought to forestall political change by building firewalls between its citizens and the outside world, so, too, is Egypt experimenting with limits on what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called "the freedom to connect." Though companies like Google, Yahoo and Windows Live have the same VoIP service, Skype has been singled out for banishment. Egypt's three main mobile operators, Mobinil, Etisalat and Vodafone, are now prohibited from hosting Skype via mobile phones, USB or other mobile modems. One explanation for this is money. But it could really be about government control. The Arab world's cellular market is liberalizing at a steady clip. Mobile phone subscribers are up 17 percent, according to an Arab Advisors Group report, with two Egyptian companies, Mobinil and Vodafone Egypt, leading the pack. Though mobile VoIP use on these networks is limited, it is growing. With more users turning to VoIP for international calls, Telecom Egypt has taken a hit. But the fight for profits can't explain this ban. As Telecom's chief commercial officer Emad Elazhary let slip in an interview with Daily News Egypt, "I don't believe [Skype has] negatively affected [our profits]. Many people would never have made international calls." Elazhary was correct — many Egyptian users probably wouldn't have placed international calls through Telecom Egypt. What average Egyptian could regularly afford rates starting at \$0.50 a

minute? Meanwhile, Skype and other VoIPs offer connection for free or at little cost. Until this latest ban, mobile Skype usage had been tolerated, and Egyptian users are allowed to use Skype to make international calls via fixed-line computers. So why is Skype banned only over mobile networks and not fixed-line networks? Why now? The likely explanation has more to do with politics — and the many young people connecting to the outside world. Without tipping off the human rights community and drawing condemnation by banning all Internet and mobile communications — as Iran and Syria did — Egypt looks to be surreptitiously hampering its citizens' uncontrolled and unmonitored communication during a precarious moment in Egyptian politics. President Hosni Mubarak recently celebrated his 82nd birthday. In ill health and with no vice president, the elder Mubarak no doubt envisioned a smooth transfer of power to his son Gamal in coming years. But Mohamed ElBaradei's return to Egypt is complicating matters. ElBaradei has criticized Mubarak's regime. Now he has also challenged the Egyptian people to shake off political apathy and stand resolute in the face of government intimidation. Egyptian authorities are not above rigging the coming elections, but they'd rather not have dirty laundry aired over cyberspace and mobile lines by political dissidents. Cairo doesn't want to replay Tehran's summer of 2009, when the Green Party used social networking and the Internet to expand protests over what appeared to be a fraudulent election. The prospect of Egypt's political activists connecting, unmonitored, with international networks to disrupt the current regime's carefully constructed order was perhaps enough to prompt Cairo to issue this pre-emptive ban. This Skype ban shouldn't be a surprise. Arab governments have proved adept at controlling technology to retain control over the ideas, images and conversations of their citizens. They believe they can maintain control even with newer technologies. But social networking and the immediacy of decentralized communication have affected Egyptian and Arab youth. Technology has changed what the young expect from governments and how they interact with them. Internet 2.0 opened up the communication space in these controlled societies, allowing individuals who don't have political power to influence the agenda. Now, low-cost communication technologies, like Skype, allow activists and citizens to be linked to new ideas from around the world. Regime critics say not to expect the Egyptian authorities to stop at banning Skype. Rumors are already circulating that Google Chat is next. The Egyptian government is clearly not taking any chances in other respects. It has long promised to end the decades-old emergency law that allows the government to bypass constitutional provisions, detain suspects without charge and limit freedom of expression. Instead, the law was renewed Tuesday for two more years. Government officials seem to have left the Skype ban's wording intentionally vague. The question is how the international community, particularly Washington, will react to this ban. The Obama administration has championed Internet freedom. But its rhetoric needs to be backed with actions in more countries than China and Iran. Today, we are seeing that economic and political modernization go hand in hand with an online "freedom to connect." Lydia Khalil, a former intelligence analyst for the New York Police Department, is a board member of the Project on Middle East Democracy.

### **Egyptian activists mark the 62 Nakba Day**

Nearly one hundred Egyptian activists protested Saturday to mark the 62nd Nakba Day in downtown Cairo, voicing criticism to their country's foreign policy. Armed with flags and posters in support of Palestine, activists from the Nasserist Karama party, the Revolutionary Socialists, the leftist Tagammu party and the pro-change Kefaya movement, mounted the stairs of the Lawyers' Syndicate to mark the "day of catastrophe", or "Nakba" on May 15, the day in 1948 when Israel declared statehood after which some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled in the war that ensued. Resistance is the solution to the Zionist invaders" and "Palestine is an Arabic state and (Egyptian President Hosni) Mubarak has traded the (Palestinian) cause," chanted the activists while burning Israeli flags. Prominent MP Hamdeen Sabahi called for annulling the 1978 Camp David Peace Accord between Egypt and Israel. "We participated to confirm that the people are pro-resistance and against Camp David," said Sabahi, who is also the president of the unlicensed pan-Arabist Karama party.

Activists, dressed in black with the Palestinian checkered scarves, hailed armed resistance against Israel, dismissing equating it with terrorism. "We are pro-resistance in all its forms (armed or unarmed) in the face of an enemy that owns weapons of mass destruction," said Yehia Nayer of the Egyptian Committee for Combating Colonialism and Zionism. Leftist Revolutionary Socialists group--who organized the protest--, issued a statement recounting the consequences of the formation of Israel in 1948 on more than 77 percent of the land of Palestine. Demonstrators, who were cordoned off by heavy security forces, called also for reforming Egypt's domestic political structures. "I am an Egyptian who wants to back any movement that aims at changing the Egyptian regime," said Shahira Abdel Wahhab, who identified herself as a housewife with four children. Other activists said that Egypt's internal affairs and the Palestinian cause are inseparable. "Like Palestine, we are also invaded economically, culturally and politically," said Salma Shukrallah, an activist from Kulona Mokawama (We Are All Resistance), an Egyptian anti-Zionism group. Kulona Mokawama denounced the construction of an underground steel wall along side Egypt's borders with the Gaza Strip which began last year. The Wall "aims at inhibiting the tunnels that are used for trafficking food and resistance tools from Egypt into Gaza," the group said in a statement. "The street movement should be expanded to integrate pan Arab demands along calling for democratic reform," said Sabahi, who has expressed his willing to run for the 2011 presidential elections. Outside the heavily besieged small protest at the Lawyers' Syndicate, Cairene pedestrians did not seem occupied with remembering the Nakba Day. "We have other Nakbas," said Mahmoud Gaber, a taxi driver. "We are not willing to remember 1948, not even 1973," added Gaber, referring to Egypt's war with Israel. "When you see a man searching the garbage for food, you think this is the real disaster," he explained.

### **Demonstrators block ring road to protest Egypt PM decision**

Saturday, 15 May 2010- Nearly 100 Egyptian protesters from Geziret Mohamed and Tanash clashed with security forces yesterday on the Cairo ring road. Several suffered from breathing difficulties after security forces used tear gas to disperse the crowd. The demonstrators reportedly blocked the road and prevented vehicles from passing. They were protesting a recent decision by Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif to divide Geziret Mohamed into two parts, one of which will become part of Giza and the

other of 6th of October City. Tanash will fall under the jurisdiction of 6th of October City. Security forces set up fences and checkpoints around the protesters who were blocking the flow of traffic on the ring road. Members of the security forces then contacted several popular leaders to persuade them to end the protest. After negotiations failed, the security forces began using tear gas to quell the protest, and the demonstrators were forced to leave the road. Security forces chased them into the side streets, and approximately 100 residents suffered breathing problems from the tear gas canisters. Residents hurled stones at the Central Security Forces and burned a police car. Meanwhile, protesters and residents criticized Nazif for his decision to allow the government to seize ownership of 170 feddans. The housing ministry will seize additional land in order to build a service center for investors. The area in question is between the gas company and Warraq and will make several people homeless, said the protesters. "We complained several times about the decision, but no one responded to us," said Mahmoud Abdel Azim, one of the residents. "So we decided to block the ring road until a new decision is made to restore the previous arrangement."

## **Water issue**

### **Speaking of water, pt I: Virtual water in MENA region**

Water poverty and oil wealth are locked into a peculiar relationship in which the abundance of one resource can make up for profligacy with the other. But the assumption on which this relationship is based is ill founded. At some point the oil, or the water, will run out. The designation of entire states--and indeed entire regions--as "oil economies" implies that hydrocarbon exports alone keep these economies afloat. But the oil industry--its machinery, laborers and managers--relies as much upon the steady supply of water as global industry, commerce and consumers do upon oil. Politicians, activists, scholars, public intellectuals, and media commentators have developed a large body of literature on water scarcity in the Middle East. They have largely concentrated on rivers--the Jordan, Tigris, Euphrates, Nile and others--while neglecting oil economies. To understand oil economies or water scarcity, one has to understand that the two are closely intertwined. Yet the debate about the Middle East and North Africa seems bound to prevent such awareness. The term "virtual water" has come to prominence as a way of referring to the hidden water cost of food and other goods. Growing food obviously requires a continuous supply of water, an investment many Middle Eastern and North African countries are unwilling or unable to make. Most oil-producing countries--not irrationally--simply import tons of food, thus sparing themselves the need to invest their own limited water resources in feeding the population. Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser extent other states, have relied on income from the petrochemical industry to outsource the production of food. This has allowed these countries to avoid expensive and environmentally hazardous desalinization or irrigation projects. Virtual water, however, does not mean that oil economies are any less dependent on water. Virtual water actually poses a challenge to rethinking the so-called oil states of the Middle East. The wealth of these states can be easily measured in oil prices, commodity markets and investment flows, or on a smaller scale through projects such as Burj Khalifa or Dubai's equally infamous palm tree-shaped islands. But

economists and political scientists, much less journalists and governments, have not adequately accounted for virtual water. The structures of the virtual water economy are well known. Trade statistics easily trace the basic market dynamics of who supplies food to whom. Nevertheless, the oil economy and the world of virtual water remain largely divorced in scholarly and technocratic studies. “Oil economies” are understood in terms of their petrochemical, industrial production, and not in terms of their less visible, but no less important, water and food consumption. Reliance on virtual water, purchased with petrochemical revenues, does not mean that oil economies are not also water economies. Instead, it means that water economies with access to significant funds have the power to determine the use of natural resources outside the geographic boundaries of the state. Media reports have focused on the purchase of agricultural land abroad, particularly in Africa, by petrochemical powers. Many have correctly remarked that such investments show that, as in the classic imperial age, state authority is not limited to particular territories. But there is more to the story than that. In sinking so many petrodollars into African lands, the oil states are effectively concealing their participation in an economic system of water rent, disguising their dependence on African “virtual water” with their nominal source of independence--their fabulous oil wealth. Meanwhile, neither oil states nor other observers have taken much note of the potential of these land purchases for introducing new forms of economic domination and instability.

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### **Sudan and Egypt to cooperate on water treatment**

The Company for Drinking Water and Sewage in the governorate of Beheira and the Drinking Water Authority of the Sudanese Red Sea state signed a joint cooperation agreement seeking to improve water quality and increase water production in the Sudanese state through Egyptian expertise. The agreement was signed as the Egyptian government is preparing to implement the model used by the Beheira company to purify and treat water throughout Egypt. This implementation model follows the company’s successful use of mechanized meter reading systems, payment collection and the development of an innovative pneumatic pump system for water purification. The International Organization for Standardization awarded the company five certificates of compliance for meeting water compatibility and occupational safety standards under a plan adopted by Mahmoud Mansour, chairperson of the board of directors. The company plans to replace the current water meters with electronic meters, which will allow for readings that are more accurate and the elimination of human error. Recently, the company implemented the “Life Cycle Assessment” program to analyze the effects of water treatment on the environment. The program tracks water as it moves through the plant and measures water loss and energy consumption during treatment, with the intent of maximizing plant efficiency and minimizing its environmental impact. The company recently began employing video-equipped robotic vehicles that navigate sewage pipes to perform maintenance work, therefore eliminating the need for street-level repair work.

## East Africa seeks more Nile water from Egypt

The Nile is vital for many different reasons. Four East African states have signed an agreement to seek more water from the River Nile - a move strongly opposed by Egypt and Sudan. Under colonial-era accords, the two countries get 90% of the river's water. Upstream countries including Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania and Ethiopia say it is unfair and want a new deal but nothing has been agreed in 13 years of talks. A further three countries were represented at the meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, and may sign up later. BBC East Africa correspondent Will Ross says there is a danger that the split could hamper any further efforts for all nine countries involved to negotiate how the waters should be shared. The BBC's Wyre Davies in Cairo says that for Egypt, water is a matter of national security. Egypt has dismissed the Entebbe agreement, saying it "is in no way binding on Egypt from a legal perspective". "Egypt will not join or sign any agreement that affects its share," ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki was quoted as saying by the AFP news agency.

### 'Rule of the jungle'

Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda signed the agreement in Entebbe, which would lead to experts determining how much water each country would be entitled to.



Kenya did not sign the agreement as its minister could not attend. Like Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, it sent officials to Entebbe. Ethiopia, for example - the source of the Blue Nile - contributes an estimated 85% of the river waters but is able to make relatively little use of its natural resource. Rwanda's Environment Minister Stanislas Kamanzi told the BBC: "Egypt has been requesting to defer the signing of the

Cooperative Framework Agreement - we couldn't wait any longer, since we have been negotiating for over 10 years." Egypt and Sudan say they will not sign a new deal unless they are first guaranteed an exact share of the water.

Ahead of the meeting, Ahmed el-Mufti, the legal counsel for Sudan's delegation, told Reuters news agency that all nine countries were close to an agreement, so there was no need for the upstream countries to sign their own deal. He also said Egypt and Sudan needed water more than those in more fertile regions. "They have a lot of rain: This is nature," he said. "They do not need the water. Here in Sudan we need water." Egypt's farmers are almost wholly dependent on the River Nile and its water.

The BBC's Will Ross says that, with populations soaring, demand for water increasing and climate change having an impact, there are warnings that wrangling over the world's longest river could be a trigger for conflict. "If we don't have an agreed co-operative framework, there will be no peace," Kenya's director of water resources John Nyaro told the BBC before the meeting.

"Where there is no rule of law, the rule of the jungle does not provide peace."

### **Four countries sign new Nile treaty**

Friday, May 14, 2010 Four African countries on Friday signed a new treaty on the equitable sharing of the Nile waters despite strong opposition from Egypt and Sudan who have the lion's share of the river waters. *The Nile provides Egypt with 90% of its water needs.* Rwanda, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania signed the new framework while Kenya issued a support statement, an AFP correspondent reported. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo were not represented at the meeting in the Ugandan town of Entebbe. The upstream countries want to be able to implement irrigation and hydropower projects in consultation with Egypt and Sudan, but without Egypt being able to exercise the veto power it was given by a 1929 colonial-era treaty with Britain. The Nile Basin Initiative, which had been spearheading the talks, will now become the Nile Basin Commission and will receive, review and approve or reject projects related to Africa's longest river. It will be based in Addis Ababa and have representation from all nine Nile basin countries. Egypt's State Minister for Legal Affairs Mufid Shehab said the new agreement was a mistake. "We do not want to view it as a destructive act, but we view it as a mistaken action and we should stop it," state media quoted Shehab as saying late Thursday. "We never hoped this would happen because it completely goes beyond the framework of cooperation." Also Thursday, a senior EU envoy urged seven east African countries not to sign the new deal and to settle differences with Egypt and Sudan first. Marc Franco, who heads the European Union delegation in Egypt, said a separate deal would "make the political problems that exist worse." Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit warned at the weekend that Cairo's water rights were a "red line" and threatened legal action if a partial deal is reached.

## **Iraq**

### **Political front**

### **Political wrangling continues in Iraq**

As bickering over the results of Iraq's March elections turns into horse-trading, the country still has no new government, More than two months after Iraqis went to the polls

in the third election to be held in the post-Saddam Hussein era, the nation's divided political and ethnic groups have made little progress towards forming a government after the inconclusive vote in the 7 March parliamentary elections. Worse, various extremist groups, mainly Al-Qaeda in Iraq, have been taking advantage of political differences and carrying out more attacks in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities to create further turmoil. The protracted political wrangling, which comes as Washington prepares to reduce by nearly half US troops in the country by the end of August, has dampened hopes that forming a cross-sectarian alliance might bridge the nation's sharp divides. In a move that might cast new doubt on the process of forming a new government, Iraq's two main Shia groups have formed a parliamentary alliance that is widely believed to be intended to keep the country's Sunni minority marginalised and could spark a new round of sectarian violence. Under the deal, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance agreed that they would pool their 159 parliamentary seats, leaving them just four seats shy of an overall majority. However, the new bloc still has to resolve the long-standing sticking point of who will be its nominee for prime minister amid fierce competition for the crucial post among rival leaders of the alliance. The two Shia groups' main challenger, the mainly Sunni Iraqiya List which won the most votes in the elections, immediately denounced the planned alliance, warning that violence may result if it is barred from taking office. "This conflict will not remain within the borders of Iraq," said Iraqiya List leader Iyad Allawi in an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian* on Monday. "It will spill over, and it has the potential to reach the world at large, not just neighbouring countries," he said, in a clear signal to the international community and regional powers to intervene. Allawi, a secular Shia, insisted that his bloc has the right to form the next government. Earlier he had demanded that an internationally backed caretaker government be formed and new national elections held. Allawi's warnings underscored a deepening conviction within his coalition that a Shia-dominated alliance is trying to undermine their slate's lead by any means possible. The Sunni boycott of the previous 2005 parliamentary elections led to the emergence of a Shia-led government. This in turn left the once-ruling minority feeling alienated and resulted in a bloody insurgency and sectarian war that gripped Iraq for years following the toppling of the Saddam regime in the 2003 US-led invasion. Further complicating the dispute are the Kurdish parties that allied themselves with the Shias in forming a government following the 2005 elections. The Kurdish parties have also expressed their support for the new Shia alliance, signalling that a Kurdish-Shia governing agreement may be imminent. The Kurdish move came as signs emerged that the long-standing Iraqi-Kurdish oil dispute may be edging closer to a resolution. Iraqi Oil Minister Hussein Al-Shahristani said this week that agreement had finally been reached with the Kurds to allow their regional government to be remunerated for oil production in areas under their control, ending a long-standing dispute over oil revenues. The Kurdish decision to support the Shia alliance, though it has not yet been finalised, was widely expected, since key Sunni groups in the Iraqiya List have made it clear that they are not ready to make concessions to the Kurds on crucial issues such as oil and the future of the city of Kirkuk and other disputed areas. However, any Kurdish-Shia agreement that excludes the Iraqiya List from government is likely to pay a heavy price in terms of the country's political stability, given that Sunni participation will be the key to ending the Sunni insurgency and facing up to the Kurds' demands. To prevent this from happening, Al-Maliki is

reported to be reaching out to Al-Maliki in an attempt to include the Iraqiya List in the new government, though he will never agree to any deal that excludes him from forming the new government. Analysts have raised fears that if Iraq's Sunnis feel disenfranchised as a result of the political horse-trading currently going on in the country, a new era of sectarian bloodshed could result and maybe even another round of civil war. The current political uncertainty has also fuelled violence in the country. On Monday, dozens of people were killed or wounded in a coordinated series of 20 attacks on civilians, police and security forces in Baghdad and beyond. Gunmen used silenced and automatic weapons, roadside bombs and cars packed with explosives to hit six checkpoints manned by local and federal police and the Iraqi army in the capital. The worst single incident came in the shape of a car bombing outside a textiles factory in the central city of Hillah, 60 miles south of Baghdad, which left 20 dead. A double bomb attack near a mosque in Suwayra, south-east of the capital, killed 11 people and wounded 70. Attacks were also reported in the cities of Falluja and Mosul. Sunni insurgents have often targeted the Iraqi police and army as a way of undermining the country's already fragile security and intimidating the security forces. Meanwhile, the Mahdi Army, a militia group loyal to the radical Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, has also reportedly started to regroup, adding street muscle to a group that won 40 of parliament's 325 seats in the March elections and emerged stronger as a result. Al-Sadr disbanded the paramilitary group in 2008, and its return is a result of the political vacuum in the country resulting from the failure to form a new government. All these developments raise the question of what steps the Obama administration will now take to help end the chaos in Iraq before drawing down US troop numbers in the beleaguered country. The US military is scheduled to draw down its troops in Iraq at the end of August, leaving a "residual force" of 50,000 on a non-combat mission. According to the agreement between the two countries, all US troops are scheduled to be out of Iraq by the end of next year. Momentum towards making this agreement reality has now been threatened by the rising tensions in Iraq and the seeming inability of the Obama administration to take action to resolve the conflict. Many pundits in Washington are now urging senior administration officials, including US President Obama himself, to become more engaged in efforts to end Iraq's stalled political process. Some are also suggesting that the administration show more flexibility in implementing the troop draw-down. Worries about Iraq's slipping into anarchy have also spread throughout the region. During a visit to Cairo this week, the Iraqi president Jalal Talabani appealed to the Egyptian leadership and the Arab League to try to help defuse the dispute over forming a new government in the country. Talabani's plea came as the leaders of Qatar, Syria and Turkey met in Istanbul on Monday to discuss the Iraqi political impasse, among other issues. Al-Maliki himself dispatched envoys to Syria and Turkey to urge their leaders to help end the deadlock, even though he has also bitterly complained in the past about interference in Iraq by the country's neighbours.

### **Iraq Recount Doesn't Change Result**

A recount of votes in the Baghdad area has not led to any changes in the final results of the 68 seats in Baghdad districts from the March 7 parliamentary elections. "The number of seats stays as is," Saad al-Rawi, one of the nine commissioners at the Independent High Electoral Commission, said on May 16. That poll saw former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqi bloc take the most seats with 91 followed by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law alliance with 89. There are 325

seats in the Iraqi parliament.

### **Sunni Militants In Iraq Name New Leader**

May 16, 2010 A Sunni militant umbrella organization that includes Al-Qaeda in Iraq has announced that it has selected a new leader. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) has posted information on jihadist websites saying the group's new leader, or emir, is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi. The new leader replaces Abu Omar al-Baghdadi who was killed in a U.S.-Iraqi air strike in April along with Al-Qaeda in Iraq's leader Abu Ayyub al-Misri. The posting also announced that Abu Abdullah al-Hassani al-Qurashi was named as the group's deputy leader. On May 14, Al-Qaeda in Iraq named al-Nasser Lideen Allah Abu Suleiman as minister of war. Abu Suleiman vowed that "a long gloomy night and dark days colored in blood" awaited Iraq's Shi'ite population.

### **Iraqi Election Commission Awaits Ruling On Disqualified Candidates**

May 14, 2010 -- A senior Iraqi election official says the independent electoral commission will await the results of an appeal by nine disqualified candidates before deciding if they can take their seats, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Sardar Abdel Karim, a member of the electoral commission, told RFI today that if the seven-member appeals panel upholds the disqualifications made by the Accountability and Justice Commission then the votes of those barred candidates will be distributed to other lists as stipulated by law. He said that would give some factions additional seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives, which has 325 seats. In the meantime, the electoral commission is continuing a recount of roughly 2.5 million votes cast in Baghdad on March 7 after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition demanded a partial recount, which is expected to be completed later today. Maliki's coalition finished a close second to former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's Al-Iraqiyya movement, which officially won 24.7 percent of the votes to the State of Law's 24.2 percent. A change of some 58,000 votes in the recount could give Maliki's coalition more votes than Allawi's movement. Abdel Karim pointed out that of 215 official complaints filed by various parties, the electoral commission has so far thrown out 70 as irrelevant or unfounded while it continues to investigate the others. Analyst Asaad al-Ibadi told RFI that the electoral commission has demonstrated a commendable impartiality which all political leaders should respect by refraining from interfering in its work. He said that in his opinion the electoral commission has convincingly refuted all claims of incompetence or that it is allowing irregularities to go

### **Officials audit suspect ballots at a counting center in Kirkuk on March 18.**

May 14, 2010 An Iraqi election official has said that a recount of votes cast in Baghdad in Iraq's March 7 elections has been completed and that no fraud was found. Qasim al-Abudi, a spokesman for the Independent High Electoral Commission, said the results of the recount will be made public on May 17. Some 2.5 million ballots in the country's recent parliamentary elections were manually recounted for the recount. The recount of votes for Baghdad was requested by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who alleged

violations in polling stations. Baghdad accounts for about one-fifth of the 325 seats in parliament.

### Iraqi Election Hinges On Court Ruling On Banned Candidates

The committee that vets Iraqi officials for ties to Saddam Hussein's outlawed Ba'ath Party says it will no longer disqualify candidates in the March parliamentary elections. But the committee is not going to reinstate nine winning Sunni candidates who were retroactively disqualified after the official results were announced. Instead, the fate of those candidates -- and possibly the outcome of the entire election -- depends on the rulings of an appeals court in their cases. Ali al-Lami, head of Iraq's Accountability and Justice Committee, says the committee's work will continue. But he says it will no longer involve candidates from the March 7 election. Lami's announcement follows an agreement by politicians and officials in Baghdad to end a four-month de-Ba'athification campaign that has focused on parliamentary candidates in the closely contested vote.

**Awaiting Court Decision** But there are many unanswered questions about the deal -- including whether nine disqualified Sunni candidates who won parliamentary seats would be reinstated. Lami said an appeals court would rule on those cases in the coming days. Ultimately, the court's ruling could determine whether a thin margin of victory will stand for Al-Iraqiyah -- a heavily Sunni-supported coalition led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. If the disqualified Sunni candidates are reinstated, Al-Iraqiyah likely would have the constitutional right to be the first to try to form Iraq's next government. On the other hand, if the disqualifications of the winning Sunni candidates stand -- and if a pending recount of Baghdad's 2.5 million votes favors Shi'ite candidates -- Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shi'a-dominated State of Law coalition could well be given the chance to form the next government. Accountability and Justice Commission member Ahmad Chalabi told "The New York Times" that negotiations last week had led to the agreement to end disqualifications. Still, Chalabi said disqualified candidates "need to figure out how to do the legal unwinding" by appealing the commission's decision in court. Chalabi also told "The New York Times" that he had agreed not to oppose those appeals, suggesting that the appeals process would be successful.

**Searching For Partners** Meanwhile, both Allawi and Maliki are continuing attempts to build coalitions amid the uncertainty about which way the appeals court will rule. Allawi told RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq on May 10 that he hoped his bloc would be able to form a governing coalition with Shi'ite and Kurdish politicians. "We are open to all lists," Allawi said. "We have meetings and dialogues with our brothers in the State of Law bloc, and we hope to meet its leader, Maliki, as we met the president of the [Iraqi] National Coalition and the president of the Kurdistan Alliance and the heads of the other blocs. So we are really hoping to meet [Maliki] in the next few days." But other Iraqi officials, including Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, say nobody knows how the appeals court decisions could play out. They suggest the disqualifications could stand, giving a new alliance between Maliki's State of Law and the conservative Shi'ite Iraqi National Alliance a strong chance of setting up the next government. State of Law spokesman Hachim al-Hasani told Radio Free Iraq today that the new alliance had an "unwavering commitment to a government of national partnership as opposed to government by quotas." Ammar Tuma of the Iraqi National Alliance told Radio Free Iraq that ethnic identities should not be a cause for concern. Rather, Tuma said, it was "programs,

policies, and deeds" that count. **Return To Sectarianism?** But the stark Shi'ite identity of an alliance between the two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs has angered and worried many Sunni voters and politicians. Analyst Khadum al-Muqdad, himself a Shi'ite, told Radio Free Iraq today that the new Shi'ite alliance was reminiscent of the sectarian polarization seen in 2005. "The fears are there and they are real because there is foreign interference [in Iraq from neighboring countries,]" Muqdad said. "This was clear from the elections of 2005. If this alliance between State of Law and the Iraqi National Alliance is being influenced by Iran -- and if sectarian polarization is what Iran wants -- the Iraqis have a genuine cause for concern." Al-Iraqiyah spokeswoman Maysun al-Damaluji told Radio Free Iraq that Allawi's bloc is "skeptical" about the Shi'ite alliance and its claims that it will serve the interests of all Iraqis. She said the new Shi'ite alliance "signals a return to sectarian entrenchment" in Iraq's politics.

### **Partial Iraq Election Tallies Sent For Approval**

May 09, 2010- Iraq's election commission says it has sent results from 17 of Iraq's provinces in its March 7 poll for ratification by the Supreme Court, with Baghdad the lone exception. The votes from the Baghdad region are currently being recounted. Iraq's political parties have made little progress toward forming a new government since the parliamentary elections more than two months ago, partly due to ongoing challenges against the results and questions over the eligibility of some candidates.

### **Iraqi Shi'ite Blocs Discuss How To Select Prime Minister**

May 06, 2010-- A leading official in one of Iraq's two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs says the two have agreed on a way to nominate the country's next prime minister, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Ammar Tuma told RFI today that the State of Law Coalition, led by outgoing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and the Iraqi National Alliance, led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari, have agreed to nominate the next prime minister by consensus. The two blocs agreed to join forces in a political alliance on May 4. Tuma, who belongs to the Iraqi National Alliance, added that if the two blocs fail to come to a consensus on an acceptable nominee they would seek other alternatives, including a vote. But Tuma said "the winner in such a case would have to receive something like 75 or 80 percent of the votes to ensure the closest thing possible to selection by consensus." Hachim al-Hasani, a Sunni and a leading member of the State of Law Coalition, told RFI that the two blocs had agreed on common principles and a platform rather than a specific mechanism to nominate the next prime minister. He said "we are still waiting for such a mechanism before we can agree on a nominee for prime minister." Analyst Ibrahim al-Sumaidai told RFI that the biggest obstacle threatening the newly announced alliance is the State of Law Coalition's insistence on nominating Maliki for another term. The Iraqi National Alliance has strongly opposed his nomination, especially the party's wing that is close to radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sumaidai said Iraq's political landscape will become clearer when a recount of votes from Iraq's March 7 election is completed. Iraq's Independent Electoral Commission started the manual recount on May 3, and said it could take about three weeks.

## **Geo strategic front**

### **U.S. Says Iraq Troop Withdrawal Remains On Schedule**

May 12, 2010 The U.S. Defense Department says the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq remains on schedule and has not been delayed because of surges of violence or difficulties in forming a new Iraqi government. Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters on May 11 that the United States military now has about 94,000 troops in Iraq and remains on track to reduce the force to 50,000 by September, as pledged by President Barack Obama. Morrell added that the number of U.S. troops in Iraq is expected to fall to 91,000 by the end of May. The U.S. spokesman made his comments a day after a wave of attacks in Iraq left at least 110 people dead and hundreds of others injured. No new Iraqi government has yet emerged following March's elections, which produced no outright winner.

## **Economic front**

### **Iraq expects bumper wheat harvest this year**

Azzaman, May 14, 2010 Good weather conditions will help Iraq reap up to 2 million tons of wheat this year, according to U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Last year grain production declined drastically in the country due to severe drought. The drop in yields turned Iraq into one of the world's largest wheat importers. Last year's wheat produce was in the range of 1 million tons while Iraq's needs are estimated at more than 4 million tons. Iraq's wheat imports just from the U.S. cost the treasury up to \$1.4 billion last year. Iraq's reliance on food imports has increased and widened. The country currently imports vegetables and fruits as well as grains, meat, chicken, legumes, sugar and tea.

### **Iraq aims at 27,000 megawatts in four years**

Azzaman, May 11, 2010 The government is determined to boost power output to 27,000 megawatts in four years, said Electricity Minister Kareem Waheed. Waheed said the target to produce the massive amount of electricity that will meet Iraq's domestic needs is attainable. The ministry is known to have missed almost all its previous targets despite billions of dollars of investments. However, Waheed said the pledge this time was possible to honor because "of the agreement the government has with the Royal Dutch Shell for the storage of liquefied and natural gas in the country." The government has signed a contract with the international oil major for the installation of modern facilities in the southern city of Basra to treat and store liquefied gas. Most of the new power stations Iraq is constructing and wants to build are gas-driven. Fuel shortages are reported to be one of the major causes of power outages which may last up to 20 hours a day in major cities. To reach the new power output target, Waheed said, the government should invest \$3-4 billion every year.

### **Government slashes Iraqi farmers' subsidies**

Azzaman, May 10, 2010 The government has slashed subsidies to Iraqi wheat and barley growers, fuelling farmers' anger across the county. Director-General of Iraq's Grain Board Hassan Ibrahim said the prices the government paid for wheat and barley

were much higher than those prevalent on international markets. This year, wheat growers will get 650,000 Iraqi dinars (\$500) instead of 850,000 dinars (\$650) they received last year for each ton shipped to government silos. Barley growers' prices have been cut to 450,000 dinars (\$350) from 650,000 (\$500). Farmers Union says it will not remain silent. "The union has decided to stage protests against the reduction of prices on Wednesday," Hayder Abbadi, a union leader said. "The slump in government pricing of wheat and barley has come as a shock," he said. "We were expecting government payment for a ton of wheat to soar to 950,000 dinars." Last year rainfall was well below normal with total wheat production dropping to 1.13 million tons. Weather conditions have improved markedly this year and farmers expect a bumper harvest, exceeding 2 million tons.

### **Kurdish regional government mired in corruption, says Kurdish opposition figure**

Azzaman, May 9, 2010 The Kurdish regional government is involved in smuggling, nepotism and massive corruption, according to a senior Kurdish opposition figure. Latif Mustafa of the Kurdish Change List, the most powerful Kurdish opposition party in the region, said public and government posts were only being held in the region by the relatives and cronies of the Kurdish parties in power. The Change list has 25 deputies in the 111-member Kurdish parliament. The regional government is dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani, the region's head, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani, the Iraqi President. The Change List has snatched control of the Kurdish city Sulaimaniya from PUK's. The semi-independent Kurdish region consists of three provinces: Arbil, Sulaimaniya and Dahouk. "There is smuggling of oil which is carried out through tankers to neighboring states," Mustafa told Azzaman. "Financial corruption is spread in the Kurdish region. The evidence is the fact that the general budget was not presented to the parliament in the past years. Nobody knows how (public) money is being spent," he added. Mustafa said the ruling Kurdish parties "dole out important positions in the light of party loyalty and not professional efficiency, the reason that has lead to administrative and financial corruption." He accused PUK and KDP of raising slogans and implementing policies putting party loyalty above loyalty to the state. "For these reasons the (Kurdish) regional government is not democratic," he added. The Change List says it wants full transparency in the Kurdish region where, it claims, corruptions is even worse than in the central and southern parts of Iraq. The regional government denies Mustafa's accusations, saying he has no evidence to prove them. "The democratic system in the Kurdish region permits freedom of expression. The hurling of accusations must be accompanied by evidence," said Muhsen Saadoun, a leader of the PUK-KDP alliance.

### **Social issues**

#### **Muslim Students Stage Sit-In To Support Christians At Iraqi University**

May 07, 2010 -- Lecturers and Muslim students at northern Iraq's Mosul University staged a sit-in today to protest deadly attacks against Christian students, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. A student activist who requested anonymity told RFI that the action is in support of Christian students who have been the victims of bomb attacks and murder. He said the sit-in will end only when measures are taken to ensure the safety of Christians, in particular, and the student body as a whole. A roadside bomb and a car

bomb exploded near buses transporting students from the predominantly Christian town of Al-Hamdaniya to Mosul University on May 2. One civilian was killed and 100 others, mostly students, were wounded. Christian students stopped attending classes at Mosul University after that attack in fear for their safety. The Muslim students staging today's sit-in have said they will return to class only when their Christian counterparts do.

Student Sami Karim told RFI that the protesters are especially indignant that their fellow students have become targets simply because they are Christian. Ethel Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh Province in which Mosul is located, said that his government "sympathizes with the students and their sit-in." Referring to the security situation for Christian students, Nujaifi said security forces are "partly responsible as they have failed to properly discharge their duties." He added that there must be a thorough investigation of the recent attacks against Christians to reassure the population that such acts will not be tolerated. Before the first Gulf War in 1991 there were some 1 million Christians in Iraq. About one-third are believed to have fled Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003.

### **Iraq Launches Anticorruption Plan**

Iraq's anticorruption czar says the government has launched a five-year strategic plan to combat endemic corruption in the country, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Judge Abdel Rahim al-Ugaily, president of Iraq's Anticorruption Commission, told RFI that the plan is part of the UN convention against corruption, which Baghdad has signed. He said the measures are being undertaken in cooperation with the UN Development Program and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Al-Ugaily said the plan identifies 201 types of corruption in Iraq -- mainly in state bureaucracy -- and working teams have been set up to address each form according to a set timeframe with follow-up procedures to assess progress. He said the anticorruption commission is under no illusion that corruption will be eliminated by the plan, but expects improvements to be made. He noted that Iraq's rating in the Transparency International corruption index improved for the first time in 2009, though it's still a very low 176th in the world. Al-Ugaily said the commission is also appealing a recent Baghdad court verdict acquitting former Trade Minister Falah al-Sudani on corruption charges. The 2010-2014 anticorruption plan is overseen by a joint council comprising the Anticorruption Commission, the Financial Audit Office, and the Inspector-General's Office. Khalid Khidair, director of the council, told RFI that the five-year plan began by training some 250 officials and NGO activists who will teach more than 100,000 Iraqis to staff a public awareness campaign against corruption. He added that the trainers will lecture at workshops attended by government officials and nongovernmental organizations that will teach about the legal and administrative aspects of reporting corrupt practices. Khidair said this is the first time Iraq has seen such an anticorruption action with broad public involvement.

### **Iraq On Air: Should Girls Study?**

*RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq has just launched a weekly youth program, "Shabab al-Nahreïn" (The Youth Of Two Rivers ). The program takes on taboo issues in Iraqi society, particularly those among the country's booming younger generation (60 percent of the Iraqi population is under the age of 25). In her late teens, Huda is beautiful and smart, a combination many parents hope to see in their children. "Having a diploma," says the young woman from northern Iraq who didn't want to give her full name, "is the*

same as having a weapon." Yet the power afforded to women by education -- critical thinking, debate skills, career possibilities, and the ability to read marriage and legal contracts -- is seen as a drawback by many Iraqi families. Huda's family stopped her from attending school when she was 13 years old. "I had just learned to read and write," she says. "They said the reason was because 'you're too beautiful.' I wish I could finish my studies, see the world, my friends." Now Huda is at home most of the time. "What am I doing? Just cooking and cleaning the house. What am I contributing [to society]? Now I have to rely on my father and brother for everything," she says. But Huda's father believes he is saving his daughter from an unhappy marriage. "If a girl studies too much, it will just make people get divorced," he says. "If my daughter goes to university, she will become very stubborn. Her husband won't like this, and eventually he will divorce her." "Why would I send her to school?" he asks. "Eventually, there is a husband waiting for her." Thirty percent of girls in Iraq's rural areas are never even enrolled in primary school, while less than half of all Iraqi children (44 percent) finish their primary studies. One in five Iraqis over the age of 15 is illiterate, with illiteracy rates among women more than twice that of men. Pulling girls out of school early to marry them off is common in the country's sprawling rural provinces -- somewhat less so in Baghdad, where university attendance among women is considerably higher. On average, one in five Iraqi girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is married.

**'Girls Have Very Small Minds'** Huda's father also claims that unemployment, which a **2009 UN report** put at 18 percent in Iraq, is a problem. "Our sons finish school, but there are no jobs for them," he says. "So why would we let girls study? We teach her how to read and write, and that's it. To go to university? To get a diploma? No, she doesn't need that. Why would [not continuing school] have a negative effect on her? It wasn't a problem for my mother or my grandmother, so why would it be for my daughter?" Huda's brother agrees. "Hundreds of girls are sitting at home and they are happy," he says. "Why would she go to school? It is better for her to stay at home. Plus, everyone knows that girls have very small minds." Seventeen percent of Iraqi women work, despite the fact that **women make up some 50 percent of the population**. By comparison, 42 percent of women are employed in neighboring Iran. But for the younger generation, taboos on women's education and employment might be slowly changing. Asked if Iraqi men are scared of educated women, one young man from northern Iraq says he doesn't think so. "Yes, there might be some men like that," he admits. "But in general, if a man is educated and has a modern mind-set, it shouldn't be a problem at all." His friend, a young woman from the same area, agrees with him -- with one caveat. She says: "Some men might think, 'She is taking my place. I have the responsibility [to provide for the family]. So why should she work [instead of me]?" But Huda's inability to continue school hurts her on more than just a practical level. "When people ask me what grade I'm in at school, that's when I feel very, very low inside," she says. "I wish I could tell them that I was still in school.... I really wish I could go back to school."

### **11 Qaeda commanders still at large in Iraq, senior military officer says**

Azzaman, May 15, 2010 Iraqi security troops have killed 32 out of 43 Qaeda commanders in the country, said Lt. Gen. Babaker Zaibari. Zaibari, who is Iraqi Chiefs of Staff Chairman, said there were 11 more senior Qaeda commanders at large "and their presence constitutes a security threat." The Iraqi government blames almost all violence

in the country on Qaeda but analysts and senior government officials say rival political factions with heavily armed militias are also to blame. They say some political factions with their unruly militias are embroiled in a bitter struggle and battle of liquidation of opponents. Zaibari made the remarks in Amman, Jordan, where he is taking part in a specialized exhibition dedicated to anti-terror weapons and equipment. He said Iraq did not have specially trained forces to combat terror in the past. However, he added, the surge in terror attacks in Iraq necessitated the establishment of such force in 2004. "This force is currently operating with high efficiency in battle fields," Zaibari added. Iraq has no exhibits on offer in Amman. It used to have relatively advanced military industries prior to the 2003-U.S. invasion but these were all cancelled and their personnel sacked. The Iraqi branch of Qaeda has lost some of its most senior leaders recently, among them the group's leader Omar al-Baghdadi and the group's military commanders abu-Ayub al-Masri.

## **Lebanon**

### **Political front**

#### **Lebanese PM to make first official visit to US**

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri will make his first official visit to the United States at the end of May to meet with President Barack Obama and address the UN Security Council, a government official said on Tuesday. "The prime minister will make his first official visit to Washington and New York later this month," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. "He will meet with President Obama and address the UN Security Council." Lebanon currently heads the rotating chair of the UN Security Council. Hariri's five-day visit comes amid mounting concerns in the region of a renewed conflict between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah which fought a devastating war in 2006. Israel and Washington have recently accused the militant group of stockpiling increasingly sophisticated weapons through the porous Syrian-Lebanese border. Israel's President Shimon Peres said last month the weapons include long-range Scud missiles. Damascus has denied smuggling weapons to the Shiite group. Hezbollah, which has two ministers in the current Lebanese cabinet, has for its part refused to confirm or deny the allegations. The Shiite party is the only faction in Lebanon that refused to disarm following the end of the country's 1975-1990 civil war, claiming that its weapons are needed to defend the country against any Israel aggression. –AFP

#### **March 14 wins Beirut, rivals take most of Zahle in Sunday's polls**

BEIRUT - While the March 14 forces triumphed in the municipal and mukhtar elections of the capital, the March 8-backed municipal list swept most of the municipal seats in the Bekaa Valley city of Zahle. According to official results issued by the Interior Ministry, the "Zahle Decision" list backed by Popular Bloc leader Elie Skaff and headed by Joseph Diab al-Maalouf has swept 19 seats of the city's 21 municipal seats. Incumbent Mayor Asaad Zgheib and Maha al-Maalouf Qasouf, supported by March 14 forces have won the remaining two seats with the rest of their list losing the contest. In Beirut, March 14-supported mukhtars swept all the seats of the Saifi and Achrafieh neighborhoods, while seven mukhtar posts in Rmeil were won by candidates supported by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Tashnag party and five by March 14 candidates. Mdawwar was the only Christian neighborhood that saw consensus among concerned parties.

Concerning results of the municipal polls in the capital, the head of Future Movement's "Beirut Unity List" Bilal Hamad got 65,000 votes whereas the first candidate of the opposing list received 11,000 votes. On another note, Member of "Lebanon First" bloc Beirut MP Ammar Hourri clarified to Voice of Lebanon Radio Station his criticism of Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud on Sunday. Hourri has criticized Baroud's attribution of Beirut's low voting turnout to the adoption of a simple majority law as "irresponsible remarks we wished weren't made by this young minister who is still in early years of his political life." In response, Baroud stressed he had his prerogatives "and no one dictates my speaking and I am not a director general reading results only." While stressing that Beirut's voter turnout was not low if compared to the 2004' elections, Hourri said he objected to Baroud's blaming low turnout on the fact that proportional representation was not adopted. He added that Baroud had the right to express his opinion, but reiterated it was not a suitable time to state it during a news conference held to announce election results. "Baroud clarified his point of view and the matter ends here," said Hourri. Also, majority Lebanon first bloc MP Oqab Saqr stressed Monday that Baroud had the absolute support of the Future Movement and Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Speaking to LBCI television station, Saqr said Hourri's remarks didn't not reflect a rift inside the government, and labeled them as a disagreement over a specific issue. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Saad Hariri thanked the Beirutis for "cementing the unity of the capital" and for emphasizing their decision in preserving coexistence and parity between Muslims and Christians. Hariri added that parity was necessary to enable all Beirutis to participate "in continuous developmental projects that the capital is always in need of." Separately, Hizbullah' second in command Sheikh Naim Qassem announced that the Hizbullah, Amal and their allies had won the seats of 18 municipal councils in Bekaa. Both parties ran the electoral contest in alliance with the Baath Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the FPM, Al-Mashari' al-Islamiya Association, along with local families. "We adopted consensual proportional representation that proved to be successful," said Qassem. Qassem made his remarks to Hizbullah MPs and officials at the headquarters of the party's campaign center in Baalbek. He also noted that a political competition only took place in the city of Baalbek. "We decided to run for elections in 62 villages," said Qassem, adding that "27 municipal councils won unopposed, 17 witnessed family contests where we supported any victorious side, and we ended up competing only in 18 villages out of the 62." "In Baalbek, there was a political contest where the Development and Loyalty list competed with an opposing list backed by the Future Movement," said Qassem, stressing that the Hizbullah-backed list swept the 21 municipal seats of the city. He said the difference between the last member of the winning list and the first one of the rival list was 1,531 votes. For his part, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman praised efforts made by Interior and Defense ministries as well as the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces to maintain law and order during the elections. Sleiman called upon all candidates, voters and political factions "to accept the results" and focus on launching developmental projects in cities and villages. -Daily Star

### **Report: Political parties paid \$67 million for 2009 campaigns**

NGO: money could have been better spent on development

Special to The Daily Star Friday, May 14, 2010 An estimated \$35 million was spent on election-related activities by different political parties in the run-up to the 2009

parliamentary election, a new report released this week by The Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) found. A further \$32 million was spent on political advertising and media in the period from August 2008 and July 2009, the LTA report tackling issues of electoral corruption revealed. The findings come at the end of a year-long Campaign Finance Monitoring Project, the first initiative to monitor campaign spending in the Middle East. It focused on the key election spending abuses, namely the misappropriation of public funds, electoral advertising, vote buying and campaign spending. “We are not here to exclude or get any candidates banned,” LTA Project Coordinator, Natacha Sarkis told The Daily Star. “We are just trying to highlight the desperate need for reform. All the money that is being diverted for things like posters could be spent on much-needed development projects.” The report was compiled by LTA-trained volunteers who assembled information on spending by monitoring Lebanon’s major media outlets and conducting interviews and on-the-ground research. The report was produced in cooperation with the UK and Canadian embassies, the International Foundation for Electoral Reform and human-rights NGO Open Society. During the campaign process, the report noted that some 63,000 small and 15,281 medium-sized pictures were hung across the country, with an additional 12,492 appearing in the last week of the campaign alone. A further 3,553 election-related activities, such as festivals and rallies, also took place across all 23 districts as well as overseas, at an estimated cost of just under \$10,000 each. Tripoli, where the election was hotly contested, had the highest number of election-related activities. The LTA monitors obtained cost calculations by tallying all free provisions at events including food, drinks, posters, entertainment and free gifts. According to the report, vote buying is the “overriding” concern in election campaigns. It consists of direct or indirect buying, including the provision of services such as infrastructure renovation, which in some pre-election instances reached \$50 million for a single project. Public infrastructure donations are not illegal but they unfairly influence votes and threaten to make a mockery of Lebanon’s new election spending regulations. Although still in its infancy, the 2009 election did see the official adoption of several long-advocated anti-corruption and democratic reforms. These included a limit on spending which was fixed at a flat amount equivalent to LL150 billion and a further LL4,000 for each voter. While hopes remain high about the future impact of these restrictions, they only came into effect in April 2009, a mere two months before the election. Existing restrictions, like the misuse of public funds or property for electioneering purposes, were also largely ignored and the report noted that almost all ministers and returning candidates used their position to campaign for re-election. It found that on average campaigning ministers stepped up their official activities by around 50 percent, with 71 percent of ministerial activities being dedicated to electioneering. “It is against the law to use public funds and utilities [such as schools and houses of worship] to help your campaign,” Omar Kabboul, LTA’s communication director said. “They are using national resources so they do not have to use their own money to fund their campaigns.” Other positive electoral reforms, including the formation of a commission to oversee election campaigns and the right of NGOs to monitor elections, were enacted in January, however, and provided positive results, the report concluded. LTA is at present monitoring the ongoing municipal polls and expects to produce a similar report on municipal spending before the summer.

## **Lebanese women and the municipal elections**

Thursday, May 13, 2010 As the municipal election-mania swept across Lebanon, posters and billboards decorating the streets featured a small – yet significant – number of elegantly dressed ladies ready to enter the battlefield. This participation of women in the local polls seemed to be a key feature of progress in the country's public life. Unofficial figures issued by the National Democratic Institute quantifying women's representation in municipal councils following the first round of elections (i.e. Mount Lebanon) bring the percentage from 2 percent in 2004 to nearly 5.8 percent. This is certainly progress, although I am not quite sure how to describe this progress or the effect it will have on the performance of municipal councils, most of which are plagued with corruption and sleaze, to say the least. Yet one reality is certain: those women who ran for the local polls are heroes. Involving at the same time family affiliations and feuds, political belonging and religious and sectarian beliefs, the campaign for municipal polls was no less than a minefield, and the elections themselves no less than a real battlefield in which all weapons seem to be allowed. In a more pragmatic approach, it seems that issues related to women's participation in these elections have a wide variety of origins and fall on everybody's responsibility, including the women themselves. While political parties are usually the first to be blamed for not encouraging and not involving women in their structure and any democratic process, what these elections have revealed is that more than one component underlying Lebanon's social fabric needs to be addressed and one core issue needs to be tackled. Here are a few observations drawn from the experience of the Free Patriotic Movement and of independent women candidates during the first round of elections, the ones held in Mount Lebanon, an area I would describe as the most liberal in terms of women rights and issues:

1. Women interested in participating in the local elections were minimal to begin with, despite repetitive pleas by the head of the party through internal memos and public appearances. The quest for women candidates was a very hard task that was eventually left for representatives of the various areas and towns.
2. Outside the scope of the party, some women who had the courage to take the initiative and express their will to participate or to actually run for the elections were ill-prepared for the battle: they failed to be part of the local negotiation efforts and expected to be advocated for during their absence which obviously did not happen in elections where each person – man or woman – fights for their own interests.
3. Another category of women who ran took part in the negotiation efforts were mostly fought by other women! As such, gender solidarity proved to be a scarce commodity and spearheading fights against women were other women ...
4. Another category of women includes those who were courageous enough to take part in the battle, but who failed to engage in the political tug of war that is inevitable in such circumstances arguing that only gender is to be taken into account, regardless of the political realities on the ground. Accused of being out of touch with these political realities, these women candidates lost their credibility.
5. Another category of women are the ones who made it to the municipal councils because they were viewed as a factor of compromise, and not of consensus and strength. As such they form a weak and non-threatening representation with no real decision making and that different groups would reluctantly consent to in a ridiculous form of waiving one's right.

6. The myth that Lebanon should get rid of its patriarchal system should be addressed in a more rational and realistic approach: turning the patriarchal society into one that supports the woman and acknowledges her role.

The equation is very simple: in fierce battles such as the ones we just had, no women can survive without the support of their families.

7. Finally, you have those women who have the natural ability to negotiate, the boldness to be part of the decision making, the immunity to face defamation in a society that has no pity over merely a rumor about a woman, the courage to bear defeat, to hail victory with no compromise, and the audacity to be treated “as a man” and be a woman in every sense of the word. These women are the promise of the future in Lebanon’s public scene.

The elections certainly left women unhappy and disappointed with their communities, their families, and their political parties. They also left many of them happy to be part of the 5.8 percent represented in the municipal councils. Yet it is not over. It is the duty of local and international non-governmental organizations, as well as political parties to train these women on municipal work and to turn this potential compromising and non-threatening factor into a real engine for positive change.

Politics, negotiation skills, confidence-building, fighting corruption are only a few of the tasks that ought to be offered to those women now in power. In various areas of the local work, such as environment, social work, health, education, women should be given the tools they need to effect change and progress.

Finally, one main lesson is to be learned from these elections: it lies in the fact that the most critical factor underlying our political loyalties, our religious beliefs, our family affiliations and concerns is education. It is the education we feed our children with, the education we make them live by, the principles we foster and the moral values we make them cherish. The need to rethink our whole educational system has become more pressing than ever and it’s only when this education starts giving the role of women the attention and significance it deserves, only then can we claim to have gone a long way in the participation of women in our country’s public life.

### **Lebanon urged to create ministry for Palestinian refugees**

Report recommends steps to improve situation in camps

Thursday, May 13, 2010 The Issam Fares Center for Lebanon (IFCL) briefed the media on Wednesday about a number of recommendations aimed at solving the problems encountered by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The recommendations were included in a report and were the result of ideas and views expressed by participants at a conference dubbed “Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon.” It was held in October.

The report focused on the dreadful living conditions at refugee camps and it showed how these alarming conditions have turned the camps into security black holes and arenas for takfiri movements. The assistant director of the IFCL, Michel Abu Najem, read the proposed recommendations in the presence of several Lebanese and Palestinian figures and of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) representatives.

The proposal, drafted by the center, focused on four venues to resolve problems at the camps: the Lebanese government, the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian factions, UNRWA and the UN, and Arab and international donors. First, the recommendations addressed the Lebanese government and asked that a ministry for Palestinian Refugee Affairs be created and a global rescue plan be formed with the collaboration of

international organizations and Arab countries. The plan would work on rectifying the legal status of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in terms of giving them the right to possess a Palestinian passport or an equivalent document, the right to exercise certain professions, the right to own property and the right to form organizations. The recommendations then called on the Palestinian Authority and on Palestinian factions to create "a single Palestinian legal body internationally recognized and capable of putting an end to the internal chaos inside the camps." Furthermore, the proposal stressed the need to uphold the Declaration of Palestine in Lebanon which was issued in 2008 and refused any interference in Lebanese Affairs. As for UNRWA and the UN, the report said the two bodies were "responsible for the affairs of Palestinian refugee camps." It called upon the UN agency to create a realistic rescue plan to turn the camps from "ghettos" into safe and joyful havens for their inhabitants." It also asked the UN and UNRWA to prepare for an international conference with the participation of Arab, European, American and Asian donor countries. The report also called for the establishment of an independent financial regulatory body to oversee UNRWA's spending and project implementation. Najem then read the recommendations addressed to international and Arab donors. He said these countries should give priority to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon because their conditions were "the worst among other host countries like Jordan, and Syria." He stressed the issue with both humanitarian and political dimensions, and called for the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty over all its territory. "Donor countries, especially Arab countries, should provide work opportunities for the Palestinian youth because the Palestinians have great capacities in different fields and their presence does not constitute a burden," he added. – The Daily Star

### **Geo strategic front**

#### **US gives \$20 million to rebuild Lebanon refugee camp**

The United States on Wednesday announced it was giving 20 million dollars more to rebuild a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon destroyed in 2007 clashes between the army and radical Islamists. "Eighteen million dollars from the donation will be used in the physical reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp. The remaining two million dollars will go towards relief and recovery support ... to the displaced refugees," the US embassy said. The donation brings to 91.8 million dollars Washington's total contributions to the reconstruction of the camp in northern Lebanon, which was levelled in a three-month conflict between the army and Al-Qaeda-inspired Fatah al-Islam. More than 400 people, including 168 soldiers, were killed in the fighting, and the camp's 31,000 residents were transferred to nearby camps. Some of those people have since returned. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is seeking 450 million dollars to rebuild the camp and 15 nearby villages, said on Wednesday that some 209 million dollars were still needed. –AFP

**Syria: Israel would never declare war without U.S. permission**  
FM Moallem denies rumblings of imminent Mideast conflict, says Arab steps taking responsible steps to preserve security. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem denied that the Middle East was on the brink of armed conflict, telling Radio Monte Carlo on

Thursday that Israel was unlikely to declare war without first consulting Washington. Moallem told the radio that the Arab side was taking responsible steps to preserve the security of the Middle East. He added that the dialogue between Damascus and Washington cannot move forward since the United States has yet to fulfill its promise, hinting at Washington's decision to delay the stationing of the new U.S. ambassador in Damascus following reports that Syrian transferred advanced missiles to Hezbollah. Israeli defense officials said Wednesday that Syria has delivered M600 rockets to Hezbollah militants in Lebanon within the past year. Latest claims of arms transfers to Lebanon follow recent accusations by President Shimon Peres that Syria Hezbollah gave long-range Scud missiles, capable of inflicting heavy damage on Israel's cities. Other government figures, including Defense Minister Ehud Barak, have since avoided repeating the allegations and it is unclear whether Damascus could have delivered the 44-foot liquid-fueled missiles, handling which requires complex logistics, undetected. Yet doubts over the Scuds have not masked growing fear in the Israeli defense establishment over Hezbollah's rapidly expanding arsenal. On Tuesday the army's head of intelligence research, Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz, told the Knesset that the Scud transfer was the "tip of the iceberg". Baidatz said that despite strong backing for Hezbollah, Syria remained keen to strike a peace deal with Israel. "A political settlement with Israel is high on Syria's list of priorities and intelligence shows a will to reach an agreement – but on their terms, meaning a return of the Golan Heights and American involvement," he said.

**Defense expert: Iron dome can't protect Israel**  
Former IAF fighter pilot, military analyst and professor at Tel Aviv University, Reuven Pedatzur, recently slammed the IDF for misleading the public about the effectiveness of the new Iron Dome anti-missile system, as well as the older Arrow system. "The Iron Dome is a scam. The flight-time of a Kassam rocket to Sderot is 14 seconds, while the time the Iron Dome needs to identify a target and fire some 15 seconds. This means it can't defend against anything fired from fewer than five kilometers; but it probably couldn't defend against anything fired from 15 km either. Since each Iron Dome missile costs about \$100,000 and each Kassam \$5, all the Palestinians need to do is build and launch a ton of rockets and hit our pocketbook." "There are also enough simple countermeasures that can be deployed to make the effectiveness of the Arrow basically zero," he added.

### **Inalienable right to non-nuclear weapon states key to NPT: Lebanon**

Lebanon said at UN on Tuesday that what holds the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) together and gives it consistency is the guaranteed right to non-nuclear weapon states to develop nuclear technology for peaceful uses. "All indicators are ushering towards a heavier reliance on nuclear energy and nuclear power in the years to come, warranting a greater emphasis on the inalienable right to peaceful uses of nuclear technology especially for developing countries," Salim Baddoura, first secretary and alternate permanent representative to the United Nations in Vienna, said at a meeting here on nuclear technology for peaceful uses. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, which entered its seventh day Tuesday, has three committees with each that is mandated in negotiating the three main pillars of the NPT-- disarmament, non-

proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. "We have to avoid anything that could upset the balance between the three pillars of the NPT," he urged at the meeting of the Main Committee III. Baddoura said that part of the "magic formula" that holds the NPT together and gives it consistency is the "inalienable right guaranteed to non-nuclear weapon states," to develop nuclear technology for peaceful exchange of giving up their nuclear weapons option. This right, he said, is enshrined in Article IV of the NPT, which he reiterated Lebanon's commitment towards, and also expressed transparency, particularly with its activities carried out under the umbrella of the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). "Nuclear science and applications are developing at a fast pace worldwide and nothing prevents Lebanon in the future from considering a possible expansion of its peaceful nuclear program, in a manner consistent with its needs, capabilities, and energy policy," Baddoura said. Cautioning against possible trends, initiatives or developments that if "misguided, miscalculated, or unilaterally driven," Baddoura said this could hamper the NPT. "Lebanon echoes the call of many other delegations to a renewed commitment to a sufficient, assured and predictable financing of technical cooperation in the IAEA," he said. "Non-proliferation concerns are of the utmost importance, but they should not translate in a way which could unduly or unjustifiably restrict the export of nuclear material or nuclear technology to developing countries," Baddoura said. –Xinhua

### **Lebanon defends Hezbollah against Israeli charges in UNSC meeting**

Responding to Israeli charges that a country that allows terrorist groups to act with impunity from its territory is not a power of sovereignty, Lebanon on Tuesday defended Hezbollah as a group defending Lebanon from foreign occupation. Addressing a Security Council meeting to hear briefings from the Chairmen of its subsidiary bodies regarding Terrorism, Israeli Ambassador Gabriela Shalev told the council that "sponsoring terrorism and permitting terrorist groups to act with impunity from one's territory are not among the prerogatives of sovereignty." "A state which is unwilling to effectively deal with such activities must be held accountable for its deeds," she added in a statement she read out in a council meeting presided over by Lebanese Charge d'affaires Caroline Ziade whose country holds the council's presidency this month. Shalev noted that the "most dangerous terrorist organizations threatening Israel's security are Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north, insisting that "no counter-terrorism strategy is complete without addressing the issue of incitement." She added that the international community "has an obligation to address in a proactive and decisive manner the threat posed by the transfer of weapons and capabilities by some Member States to terrorist organisations, including in our region, where the danger from the continuous smuggling of arms is increasingly clear." "This support undermines the stability of our entire region," she warned. Responding to Shalev's statement at the end of the meeting, Ziade said "it's unfortunate that certain states have used our debate to derail it from its course. We wanted this debate to focus on technical committees. We regret that the name of Hezbollah was used in our debate. Hezbollah is one of the representative parties in our Parliament." More importantly, she added, "the party that used that name (Hezbollah) is a neighbour that continues to aggress its neighbours. This is why we should differentiate between Terrorism and the legitimate right of nations to resist foreign occupation." -Kuna

## **Hezbollah: No indications of any imminent Israeli war against Lebanon**

Hezbollah on Monday said that there are no indications for any imminent Israeli war against Lebanon. The country's state-run National News Agency (NNA) quoted Administrative Development Minister Mohamad Fneish, who is a Hezbollah member as saying in the southern village of Nabatiyeh that Israel is not going to launch a war against Lebanon. "Who wants to cooperate with Lebanon should cooperate with its government and our political and constitutional decision, knowing that there are no indications for any Israeli aggression," he said. Fneish commented on reports suggesting that Syria transferred Scud missiles to the Shiite armed group, saying that the aim of this campaign is to hide what Israel is planning to do in the Palestinian occupied territories. "Why Israel has the right to be armed and we don't have the right to possess means to defend our land and sovereignty," he added. Hezbollah fought a devastating 34-day war with Israel in 2006. The group's chief Hassan Nasrallah vowed lately to "change the face of the region" in case of confrontation with Israel. The United Nations special coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams ruled out in April an imminent Israeli war against Lebanon. His remarks came after some Arab and Israeli media reported that Syria has transferred some Scud missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, an accusation denied by both Syria and Lebanon. Lebanon accuses Israel of intruding its airspace on a daily basis, saying it is a violation of resolution 1701, while Israel accuses Hezbollah of rearming in the border area. –Xinhua

## **Hariri tribunal says it will "get the job done"**

President of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) Judge Antonio Cassese stressed Monday that the international tribunal will reveal the truth despite the crime's complexity. Cassese discussed at Saint Josef University in Beirut the role of Lebanese law and Anglo-American law in the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Cassese addressed the investigation probing the assassination of Hariri, who was killed along with 22 others in a suicide bombing in Beirut on Feb. 14, 2005. "The work of the court is purely judicial, given the fair participating judges and will not be influenced by political ideologies," Cassese was quoted as saying by Al Mustaqbal local news site. "The STL will get the job done and reveal the truth despite the crime's difficulty," he added. The UN special tribunal was established on March 1, 2009 to try suspects that planned, facilitated and executed the assassination of Hariri. Acting registrar of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) Herman von Hebel said in April that the tribunal is ready to carry out indictments issued by Prosecutor Daniel Bellemare. –Xinhua

## **Hariri's office denies premier condoned Hizbullah's arms**

Premier 'concerned first and foremost with Lebanon's interests'

Daily Star staff Wednesday, May 12, 2010 The office of Prime Minister Saad Hariri moved on Tuesday to deny remarks attributed to the premier which appeared to condone Hizbullah's proliferating arsenal. In interviews given to As-Safir newspaper, unidentified individuals close to Hariri quoted the prime minister as saying that he supported Hizbullah receiving Scud missiles in its continuing resistance to Israel. The sources said Hariri "supported that the resistance in Lebanon acquires all that it needs, including Scud

missiles, to defend Lebanese borders against any Israeli aggression attempt in Lebanon.” “I don’t disagree with Hizbullah over the resistance. I disagree with it over some domestic issues,” the paper quoted Hariri as saying. A statement from Hariri’s press office sought to distance the premier from controversy. “While it is true that Prime Minister Hariri is concerned first and foremost with Lebanon’s interests, the quotes attributed to him [Hariri] in As-Safir are in total contradiction with such interests, because they are designed to draw Lebanon into dangerous regional tensions,” the statement said. “These are the same dangers from which Hariri has been endeavoring to protect Lebanon,” it added. All comments, Hariri’s press office stressed, were to be taken “in the context of hearsay and are incorrect.” Hariri’s denial is the latest act in the ongoing drama concerning Israeli-US allegations that Hizbullah has received long-range missiles from Syria, capable of hitting any target in Israel. The prime minister was previously forced to clarify comments made to a Spanish newspaper suggesting the Scud missile allegations made by Tel Aviv and Washington resembled claims of Saddam Hussein possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction before the US invasion of Iraq. On Tuesday, Hariri’s office denied that he had said “I don’t care what makes any foreign party happy or sad,” as As-Safir had claimed. The UN’s Special Coordinator to Lebanon Michael Williams met on Tuesday with Arab League representatives in Cairo and discussed “tensions” between Beirut and Tel Aviv. Following meetings with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu al-Gheit and Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, Williams spoke of the significance of Lebanon currently holding a Security Council presidency seat. “We discussed some of the salient issues that the Council will be tackling in the coming period,” Williams said. “I also reiterated again to Amr Moussa the importance that the United Nations ascribes to the Arab League and the positive role that it plays in this region,” he added. The UN chief also commented on regional tensions after his meeting with Abu al-Gheit. Williams said he and Abu al-Gheit “agreed completely on the need to respect and implement Resolution 1701 and all UN resolutions and to make further progress in this regard. “Sometimes tension flares, but what is important, from my perspective, is that the situation on the ground remains stable, as it has done in recent weeks,” he added. Also on Tuesday, an Arab media watchdog voiced concern over the seemingly one-sided manner in which the Scud crisis was being reported by British media. Arab Media Watch, a London based NGO, said in a statement it was worried “at the failure of the British press to report that the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said it has found no evidence to support Israeli accusations that Syria has given Scud missiles” to Hizbullah. The organization added that while a total of 10 reports had been written in the British press since Israeli President Shimon Peres’s initial allegations in April, not one had mentioned UNIFIL Commander Cuevas’ comments. “The failure to report UNIFIL’s statement follows a trend of patchy, incomplete coverage of the whole issue, a selectivity in Israel’s favor,” Arab Media Watch said. – Additional reporting by Nafez Qawas

## **Economic Front**

### **Can Lebanon weather Greek economic crisis?**

Wednesday, May 12, 2010 The severe economic crisis in Europe and Greece may have a mixed impact on Lebanese economy in general, economist and financial experts said on

Tuesday. “On one hand the fall of the euro currency against the US dollar could eventually reduce the prices of imported goods from the European countries. But a weak economy in Europe could also have negative effects on Lebanese exports to this continent,” Louis Hobeika, professor of economics and finance at Notre Dame University, told The Daily Star. He also expressed fear that European countries may be forced to reduce their economic and social assistance to Lebanon if the recession persisted. The crisis in Greece prompted the EU to inject close to \$1 trillion into the market to shore up the euro and avoid an economic pitfall. World stocks and the euro dropped sharply Tuesday as the massive relief rally triggered by the plan to contain Europe’s debt crisis fizzled out amid talk that the plan doesn’t remove doubts about the long-term solvency of indebted countries. The crisis has reverberated across the globe as governments took drastic actions to avoid another credit crunch similar to the one that occurred in 2008 and early 2009. Lebanon, which imports most of its goods from Europe, may benefit in a short term if prices of commodities fell. But there is growing concern that the Greek example would spread to other countries in the long term and Lebanon may not be immune from this crisis. “Greece’s debt to GDP is 113 percent while in Lebanon it stands at 148 percent. This should be wakeup call for the Lebanese. We can’t count on remittances alone. We need to act to avoid a big crisis in the future,” former finance minister George Corm said. Lebanon has managed so far to weather most of the financial crises that struck the United States, Europe and the oil-rich Arab states thanks to the massive cash inflow from Lebanese working abroad. The other factor which helped the Lebanese economy stand on its feet is the fact that the capital market is not too exposed to the volatile stock markets around the world. In addition, most of the government’s debt is held by Lebanese banks. “We are fortunate because we don’t owe the outside world a lot, but nevertheless we should not take things for granted,” Corm said. He added that even the massive liquidity may not be an added bonus to the Lebanese economy. “We should not forget that interest rates in Europe are near zero while the Lebanese government borrows at interest rates between 8 to 9 percent,” Corm said. Echoing similar views, Nassib Ghobril, the head of research at Byblos Bank, said that the government should speed up reforms and not only count on capital inflows. “We are not in trouble yet. But if the crisis in Europe prolongs then Lebanon maybe affected indirectly,” he said. “I want to know if the crisis persisted in Europe will this reduce the remittances to Lebanon from European countries?” he asked. He doubted that European companies and banks operating in Lebanon would exit the Lebanese market in the event that the their countries experienced economic contraction. “There are very few European companies that have a stake in Lebanese firms. But even if they did I don’t think they will pullout because the Lebanese market is profitable,” Ghobril said. Others ruled out the possibility of a decline in the number of tourists to Lebanon because the number of European visitors is very small compared to other countries.

### **Hassan: Government did not drop privatization option**

Finance Minister says Cabinet will discuss new budget in today’s meeting

Thursday, May 13, 2010 Finance Minister Raya Haffar Hassan said on Wednesday that the 2010 draft budget is the most appropriate formula under the current circumstances and assured that a privatization is still one of the government’s choices. “We will discuss the new budget in the Cabinet meeting tomorrow. This budget took a long time to

prepare. The ministries had ambitious demands and this was reflected in the ministerial statement,” the minister told businessmen and traders at Beirut Chambers of Commerce on Wednesday. The meeting is expected to witness a heated debate and between some of the ministers. Lebanon has been without a budget since 2005 as the successive governments spent money based on old allocations for the ministries. The new draft budget does not call for higher Value Added Tax rates, nor does it mention that income or capital tax will be hiked. The only exception was the modest increase on taxes on interest rates deposits from five percent to seven percent. Expenditures will jump by \$2 billion according to the draft budget and most of the money will be allocated for infrastructure investments such as electricity, roads and bridges. There is no mention of privatization in the draft budget but Hassan underlined the importance of a real partnership between the public and private sector. “A partnership between private and public sector does not mean that the concept of privatization has been rejected. Privatization is still one of the choices,” she said. Analysts rule out the possibility of any privatization this year due to the wide differences between rival March 14 and March 8 ministers. Privatization was one of the key elements in Paris III paper which was presented to the donor states. Telecoms minister Charbel Nahas, a self-proclaimed socialist economist, has repeatedly said that he won’t allow the telecom sector to move from public monopoly to private monopoly. Nahas argues that he is not totally against the principle of privatization provided that the taxes on every minute of cellular call are removed completely. The cellular network is one of the main sources of income for the treasury and the government is unlikely to consider any cuts on the rates in the foreseeable future. “Before liberalizing the sector and making the necessary reforms, I don’t think we will accept removing part of the government tax on the cellular calls,” Hassan said. She said that Nahas wanted to accompany her in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings in Washington but the Cabinet turned down his request. Hassan admitted that she was in favor of hiking the VAT due to the increase in government spending. But this idea was dropped after strong opposition from some parties, a clear allusion to the opposition ministers. “We eventually agreed that any tax at this moment will cause an additional burden on the citizens and would further exasperate the social conditions,” Hassan said. She added that economic growth over the past two years had been good but did not reflect positively on development projects nor create additional jobs. Hassan stressed that there was a need to address some of the infrastructure problems. “We saw the need to boost electricity production by 600 MW and that one of the reasons spending in the new budget went up,” she explained. Hassan said the private sector should take an active part in some of the projects listed in the new budget but did not explain the nature of this role. She revealed that the Finance Ministry plans to review some of the tax procedures because some of these practices have some flaws. – The Daily Star

### **Syria refuses entry to 50 Lebanese potato trucks**

Friday, May 14, 2010 Syrian authorities refused on Thursday to allow the entrance of 50 Lebanese potato trucks to the Syrian markets. Chairman of the association of farmers in the Bekaa valley told Al-Markaziya that it has been nine days since more than 50 potato trucks had been stopped from entering Syrian markets. “They are still parked near the Lebanese-Syrian borders until now,” he said. The Syrian authorities declared that they

refused to let the potato trucks enter the Syrian markets because laboratory tests revealed their infection with a disease. However, the Lebanese Agriculture Ministry had declared two weeks ago that the Lebanese potatoes do not suffer from any decays or diseases. Tarshishi said that the Syrian authorities' allegations may be due to the fact that Syrians aim to protect their national production by preventing Lebanese products from entering their markets. He also denied recent media reports that authorities prevented 20 wheat trucks from entering the Syrian market. – The Daily Star

## **Social front**

**Lebanese hunted for violence against wife, child**  
Abdul Munem Khalid Awad, 40, is suspected of having imprisoned his 30-year-old wife Roula Messara and her son from a previous marriage for three weeks at their home in the northern city of Tripoli, the official told AFP. Tripoli, Lebanon: Lebanese police are hunting for a man suspected of imprisoning and beating his wife and her five-year-old son, whom he allegedly also burnt with cigarettes, a security official said on Sunday. Abdul Munem Khalid Awad, 40, is suspected of having imprisoned his 30-year-old wife Roula Messara and her son from a previous marriage for three weeks at their home in the northern city of Tripoli, the official told AFP. "He beat me and insulted me regularly. Two days ago, he was caught doing the same to my child," Messara told reporters at the Islamic Hospital in Tripoli, where she was taken together with her son on Saturday. "He beat him on the head in such a way that my son threw up several times. He then burned his body with cigarettes," said the veiled victim, who appeared to be still in a state of shock. The husband "drank excessively" and had threatened the "worst revenge" before attacking the child, she added, without giving other details of the reasons for the violence. The child must now have several operations on different parts of the body for his injuries, a hospital source said.

## **Lebanon makes arrests over lynching**

Lebanese security forces have arrested two people accused of taking part in the lynching of an Egyptian murder suspect. Witnesses said some angry residents of Ketermaya village in the country's southeast tried to block the streets and stop the security forces from leaving with the suspects on Friday. Mohammed Msallem's body was strung up with a butcher's hook in a revenge attack last week that shocked the country. "The security forces raided [the village] and arrested two of the suspects," a police statement said. Msallem was arrested last week on suspicion of killing an elderly couple and their two young granddaughters. He was also suspected of raping a 13-year-old girl in Ketermaya earlier this year. When police brought him to the scene of the crime a day after the murder, angry villagers overwhelmed the policemen, beat Msallem with sticks and stones and stabbed him. To cheers and applause, they stripped him to his underwear and socks, paraded him through the street and hoisted him up on an electricity pole with a butcher's hook.

**Lebanese troops eventually arrived and took away his corpse.**

**Test for authorities** Security sources said Msallem had confessed to the crime but his motive was not clear. Human Rights Watch called on Lebanese authorities to prosecute the perpetrators and said nothing justifies mobs taking the law into their own hands. "The Lebanese authorities are facing a test: if they don't reassert the rule of law by prosecuting those who killed a suspect who was entitled to the presumption of innocence, the law of the jungle will have won the day." Many of the villagers were unrepentant while others said authorities had to bear some responsibility for sending the suspect out in public with only a few policemen. Lebanon's police chief said that he has taken disciplinary measures against the officers who were escorting Msallem. The lynching has created tensions between the two countries. The Lebanese embassy in Cairo reportedly asked for extra protection after an anonymous caller threatened to avenge Msallem's murder, although the embassy later denied those reports.

**Several apologies** Ibrahim Najjar, Lebanon's justice minister, has already apologised for the lynching. "I would like to personally apologise to the government and people of Egypt for the reaction in the village of Ketermaya, which would not have happened had it not been for the gruesome crime that preceded it," he said in a statement on Tuesday. Najjar delivered his statement standing next to Mohammed Abdul Hakam, one of Egypt's assistant foreign ministers. The attack has been also condemned by a number of Lebanese officials, including Michel Sleiman, the president, and Ziad Baroud, the interior minister.

## **Israel and Palestine Peace/settlement talks**

### **PLO debates indirect Israel talks**

Palestinian leaders have gathered in the West Bank for a crucial meeting to decide whether to approve the resumption of indirect talks with Israel. Members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's executive committee and officials from the Fatah movement are expected to endorse the move during the meeting in Ramallah on Saturday.

It comes as the US envoy to the region moves ahead with efforts to secure a deal to restart the stalled talks. George Mitchell, the US special representative to the Middle East, met Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in Ramallah in the West Bank on Friday to discuss the issue.

Abbas had agreed to engage in indirect peace talks with the Israelis only after obtaining official support from the PLO's leadership and the Arab League, which endorsed the launch of indirect talks last week. If the PLO approves the talks, Mitchell is expected to officially announce later on Saturday or Sunday that talks will begin, US and Palestinian officials said.

**Palestinian opposition** Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh, reporting from Ramallah, said there is a lot of opposition to the idea of going back to talks. "Many factions, including senior figures in the Fatah movement, believe that the conditions on the ground are not appropriate for negotiations to go ahead and yield positive results," she said.

"Still, the Palestinian president is expected to push hard for that endorsement because there are some in the Fatah leadership who believe this is a chance the Palestinians should be giving to the American administration. "There is no faith in the Israeli partner." The talks also faced opposition in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas, the Palestinian group which governs the Palestinian enclave, called on the PLO to reject the resumption of

talks, dismissing them as "absurd". "We warn the executive of PLO not to take any decision to resume talks with the enemy and to give cover to the Israeli occupation to commit more crimes against our people," Hamas said in a statement.

Khalil Shaheen, a political analyst in the West Bank, said the Palestinian people do not consider the meeting representative of all Palestinians. "Take into consideration that Hamas is not a member of the PLO and we have some factions on the left that are against and reject direct or indirect negotiations," he told Al Jazeera.

"For the Palestinians, they are more concerned about the coming change in [the Palestinian] government more than they are concerned about negotiations that will not bring them any breakthrough towards establishing their own Palestinian state."

**Shuttle diplomacy** Negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel have been stalled since Israel's three-week assault on the Gaza Strip began in December 2008.

Attempts to restart the stalled process last month collapsed when Israel announced construction of a new housing project in occupied East Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as the future capital of any independent state. The talks will not be the face-to-face meetings the administration of Barack Obama, the US president, had hoped to put in place, but will involve US officials meeting with one side at a time. Mitchell has been shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in a bid to relaunch the dialogue.

He met Shimon Peres, the Israeli president, on Friday who said Israel is ready to negotiate with the Palestinians. "Israel seeks a historic peace agreement with the Palestinians that will result in the founding of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel," Peres said. **Split agenda** Peres said his country also wants its security concerns addressed in the initial stages of the indirect talks. He said resolving security concerns, such as rocket fire from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, are of utmost importance to Israel. he Palestinians, however, have said they want the indirect talks to focus on the final borders of their future state. Either way, Abbas has said that the talks will not last longer than four months. He said earlier this week that he would consult the Arab League for advice at the end of the four-month period. Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, announced a 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank in November. Abbas' timetable for indirect talks will roughly coincide with the end of that freeze. Israeli officials have said repeatedly that they won't approve another halt in construction, regardless of what happens during negotiations.

### **Indirect Middle East talks begin**

Israelis and Palestinians have begun indirect peace talks, Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, says. He made the announcement after a meeting on Sunday between George Mitchell, the US Middle East envoy, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in Ramallah in the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank. "I can officially declare today that the proximity talks have begun," Erekat said. Mitchell will orchestrate the planned four-month indirect talks in the form of shuttle diplomacy between Israel, Palestinian territories and US.

**US involvement** But Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, said peace with the Palestinians would be impossible without direct negotiations and he called for a swift move from the US-mediated indirect talks to face-to-face contacts. "The proximity talks must bring about direct talks soon. Peace cannot be brought about from a distance, or with a remote control," Netanyahu told his cabinet in public remarks on Sunday.

Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh, reporting from Ramallah, said the Palestinians hope to reach agreement with the US on what a future Palestinian state would look like before moving towards direct negotiations with Israel. "The proactive and direct American effort is what's giving this process some momentum now," she said. "There is really very little trust in the Israeli side. Many Palestinian leaders here do not believe there is a partner on the Israeli side to talk to, but there is a lot more confidence in [US President Barack] Obama's administration at this point." The weekend developments coincided with a statement by Abdullah Gul, the Turkish president, that Syria too is ready to restart indirect peace talks with Israel. Gul made the announcement on Saturday during a two-day visit to Turkey by Bashar al-Assad, his Syrian counterpart. He said Turkey would mediate the talks. On Sunday, the two were set to hold a tri-lateral summit with Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the emir of Qatar, to discuss a range of regional issues.

**PLO backing** Officials of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Fatah, the party led by Abbas, gave their backing to indirect talks with Israel on Saturday in what they said was an effort to break diplomatic deadlock. Negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel have been stalled since Israel's three-week assault on the Gaza Strip began in December 2008. Attempts by the Obama administration to restart the stalled process in March collapsed when Israel announced construction of a new housing project in occupied East Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as the future capital of any independent state. The Palestinians have said they want the indirect talks to focus on the final borders of their future state. Netanyahu announced a 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank in November. Abbas's timetable for indirect talks will roughly coincide with the end of that freeze. Israeli officials have said repeatedly that they will not approve another halt in construction, regardless of what happens during negotiations.

#### **Russia defends Medvedev-Hamas talks**

Russia has rebuffed Israel's criticism of President Dmitry Medvedev's meeting with the leader of the Palestinian group Hamas. Israel's foreign ministry said it was "deeply disappointed" that Medvedev had met Khaled Meshaal, the group's exiled leader, during a visit to Syria this week. "Hamas is not an artificial structure," Andrei Nesterenko, the Russian foreign ministry spokesman, said in a statement on Thursday. "It is a movement that draws on the trust and sympathy of a large number of Palestinians. We have regular contacts with this movement. "It is known that all other participants of the Middle East quartet are also in some sort of contact with Hamas leadership, although for some unknown reason they are shy to publicly admit it," Nesterenko said. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, on Thursday briefed Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, on the meeting in Damascus, the Syrian capital. The Russian president urged Hamas to work on a reconciliation deal with its rival Fatah, and insisted that "no one" should be excluded from the Middle East peace process, according to his spokeswoman. "Issues related to the re-establishment of Palestinian unity as an indispensable condition for the success of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were at the centre of the meeting," Nesterenko said.

**Israeli rebuke** Israel reacted angrily to the meeting, however, saying it expected Russia to stand by the Jewish state against "Hamas terror". The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported on Thursday that the Medvedev-Meshaal meeting "came as a surprise in Israel".

The Israeli foreign ministry compared Meshaal to Shamil Basayev - the Chechen rebel leader killed by Russian special forces in 2006 - in a harshly-worded statement and

labelled Hamas a "terrorist organisation". "Israel always stood behind Russia in its fight against Chechen terrorism, and would have expected similar treatment regarding Hamas terrorism against Israel," the statement said. During the meeting with Meshaal, Medvedev called for the quick release of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in 2006. Hamas later dismissed the Russian pressure and said Shalit would not be set free without an "honourable" prisoner exchange deal with Israel. "The Russian president urged solving the problem of releasing... Gilad Shalit as soon as possible," Natalya Timakova, Medvedev's spokeswoman, said. The Hamas leader reportedly blamed Israel for obstructing negotiations for Shalit's release. The two sides have been negotiating for years through a German mediating team. Medvedev met Meshaal following a meeting with Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president. Russia is a member of the so-called Middle East Quartet, but unlike its three partners it has long urged immediate engagement with Hamas. The other Quartet members (The United States, The European Union and the United Nations) insist that Hamas must first renounce terrorism and recognise the state of Israel. Russia is one of a handful of European countries to maintain ties with the group. The United States, European Union and Israeli governments all consider Hamas a terrorist organisation.

### **PLO approves indirect Israel talks**

Leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Fatah movement have given their backing to indirect peace talks with Israel, an official has said. Saturday's decision was announced after a three-hour meeting of PLO and Fatah officials in the West Bank. "The Palestinian leadership has approved the proximity talks," Jibril Rajub, a leading member of the Fatah movement of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, said after the meeting. George Mitchell, the US special envoy for the Middle East, has been attempting to broker such indirect "proximity" talks. Under the proximity talks, Mitchell will shuttle between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to try to narrow their differences.

***Palestinian opposition*** But the decision to back talks followed "indecision and dissent," Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh, reporting from Ramallah, said. "There was disagreement during the discussions but once the decision was taken to move ahead it became the official Palestinian positions. But a variance in positions and perspectives from different political factions is not unusual in the Palestinian political system," she said. The talks also faced opposition in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas, the Palestinian group which governs the Palestinian enclave, called on the PLO to reject the resumption of talks, dismissing them as "absurd". We warn the executive of PLO not to take any decision to resume talks with the enemy and to give cover to the Israeli occupation to commit more crimes against our people," Hamas said in a statement. Our correspondent said: "Hamas, which has not participated in these inter-Palestinian discussions, has regretted the PLO executive committee decision and has said that this will only serve to provide the Israelis with cover while they continue to confiscate more land for the purposes of illegal settlements." Khalil Shaheen, a political analyst in the West Bank, said the Palestinian people do not consider the PLO-Fatah meeting representative of all Palestinians. "Take into consideration that Hamas is not a member of the PLO and we have some factions on the left that are against and reject direct or indirect negotiations," he told Al Jazeera. "For the Palestinians, they are more concerned about the coming change in [the Palestinian]

government more than they are concerned about negotiations that will not bring them any breakthrough towards establishing their own Palestinian state."

**Settlement activity** Negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel have been stalled since Israel's three-week assault on the Gaza Strip began in December 2008. Attempts to restart talks in March collapsed when Israel announced new housing projects

Attempts to restart the stalled process in March collapsed when Israel announced construction of a new housing project in occupied East Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as the future capital of any independent state. The talks will not be the face-to-face meetings the administration of Barack Obama, the US president, had hoped to put in place, but will involve US officials meeting with one side at a time.

Mitchell has been shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in a bid to relaunch the dialogue. He met Shimon Peres, the Israeli president, on Friday who said Israel is ready to negotiate with the Palestinians. The Palestinians have said they want the indirect talks to focus on the final borders of their future state. Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, announced a 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank in November. Abbas' timetable for indirect talks will roughly coincide with the end of that freeze. Israeli officials have said repeatedly that they will not approve another halt in construction, regardless of what happens during negotiations.

## **Security issues**

### **Israeli air raids hit southern Gaza**

Palestinians say tunnels are a lifeline for bringing in supplies because of Israel's blockade of Gaza. Israel has carried out two air strikes on positions in the southern Gaza Strip. The Israeli military said the attack early on Monday was "in response to the rocket that hit Israeli territory on Saturday night" and vowed to "continue to operate against those who use terror". Monday's attack, in which no casualties were reported, came just hours after Israelis and Palestinians began indirect talks towards direct peace negotiations. Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, made the announcement after a meeting on Sunday between George Mitchell, the US Middle East envoy, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, in the occupied Palestinian territory of Ramallah in the West Bank. Mitchell is to mediate the planned four-month indirect talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Negotiations have stalled since Israel's three-week assault on the Gaza Strip in December 2008. One of the targets Israel hit on Monday was reported to be a tunnel in Rafah. Israel accuses Palestinians of using a vast network of tunnels to smuggle weapons into the territory; Palestinians say the tunnels are a lifeline for bringing in essential supplies because Israel has blockaded the territory since June 2007, when Hamas seized control from Abbas's Fatah faction.

### **Israeli settler 'kills Palestinian'**

A Palestinian teenager has been shot dead by an Israeli settler in the occupied West Bank, witnesses and activists said. The settler opened fire after Palestinian youths threw stones at his car travelling along Route 60 in Mazra'a al-Sharqia, east of Ramallah.

The Popular Struggle Co-ordination Committee activist group said that Aysar al-Zaben was not involved in the stone throwing, but was tending his family's land when he was shot. "According to his uncle, his lifeless body was found lying face down on the ground

with a bullet hole in his back," the group said in a statement. Israeli police said that the killing was being investigated, while the Israeli military stressed that it was not involved in the incident during which "shots were fired after stones were thrown at an Israeli car". Route 60, which runs from Beersheba to Nazareth and connects a number of Israeli settlements, is closed to Palestinians in areas of the West Bank. It has seen a number of protests against the restrictions imposed on Palestinians by Israel.

**Settler violence** About 500,000 settlers and about 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and areas near Jerusalem annexed by Israel after the 1967 Middle East war.

Al Jazeera's Sherine Tadros, reporting from the West Bank, said there had recently been a spike in settler violence against Palestinians. "Many people are saying this is a direct response to what the settlers feel is a threat from the United States that there will be pressure put on the Israeli administration to stop, or at least freeze, its settlement building empire that it's constructed here in the occupied West Bank," she said.

"Many people are saying Palestinian blood has been shed as a price tag, if you like, for the settlers to give that message to Prime Minister Netanyahu and his administration that he cannot touch these illegal settlements in the West Bank. "And if he does try and dismantle them in any way or freeze construction, this will be the result."

In a report published on Thursday, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Palestinian territories said that there had been at least nine violent incidents involving Israeli settlers in the last week. Israeli settlers injured five Palestinians, including three children, aged five, nine and 12, in two separate incidents of stone-throwing and physical assault, it said.

**'Catastrophe continues'** Thursday's attack in the West Bank came as Palestinians marked the 62nd anniversary of the Nakba, or Catastrophe, when an estimated 700,000 Arabs were forced to flee the creation of Israel. Saeb Erekat, the senior Palestinian negotiator, said "the catastrophe continues" for Palestinians. "In other conflicts, refugee rights have been honoured and respected, including the right of return, restitution and compensation. In stark contrast, however, Israel refuses to even recognise the Palestinian right of return, thus continuing to deny the refugees' basic rights. "No state is above the law," Erekat said, calling on the international community to end Israeli "belligerence and disregard for international law". Candle-lit vigils were planned in refugee camps on Friday evening and major demonstrations were scheduled in the Palestinian territories on Saturday, including a march to the grave of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. The Palestinians recently resumed indirect peace talks with Israel, mediated by the United States, but both sides have spoken pessimistically about the chances of tangible results.

### **Israel slams Medvedev's Hamas call**

Israel's foreign ministry has rejected Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's call for immediate engagement with the Palestinian group Hamas. Medvedev met with Khaled Meshal, the exiled head of Hamas, in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on Wednesday. The Russian president urged Hamas to work on a reconciliation deal with its rival Fatah, and insisted that "no one" should be excluded from the Middle East peace process, according to his spokeswoman. The Israeli foreign ministry responded with a harshly-worded statement, which compared Meshal to Shamil Basayev - the Chechen rebel leader killed by Russian special forces in 2006 - and labelled Hamas a "terrorist organisation". "Israel always stood behind Russia in its fight against Chechen terrorism, and would have

expected similar treatment regarding Hamas terrorism against Israel," the statement said. The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported on Thursday that the Medvedev-Meshaal meeting "came as a surprise in Israel". Russia is a member of the so-called Middle East Quartet, but - unlike its three partners - it has long urged immediate engagement with Hamas. The other Quartet members insist that Hamas must first renounce terrorism and recognise the state of Israel. Russia is one of a handful of European countries to maintain ties with the group. The United States, European Union and Israeli governments all consider Hamas a terrorist organisation.

***Shalit released urged*** Medvedev also urged Meshaal to release Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in 2006. "The Russian president urged solving the problem of releasing... Gilad Shalit as soon as possible," Natalya Timakova, Medvedev's spokeswoman, said. The Hamas leader reportedly blamed Israel for obstructing negotiations for Shalit's release. The two sides have been negotiating for years through a German mediating team. Medvedev met Meshaal following a meeting with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

### **Israel stops US academic at border**

Noam Chomsky, a renowned Jewish-American scholar and political activist, has been barred from entering the West Bank. Chomsky was denied entry by Israeli immigration officials as he attempted to cross the Allenby Bridge from Jordan on Sunday. The linguistics professor, who frequently speaks out against Israeli policy in the occupied Palestinian territories, had been scheduled to give a lecture at Birzeit University in the West Bank. "I entered with my daughter and two friends who we met in Amman the day before," he told Al Jazeera. "After several hours of waiting and multiple interrogations our two friends were permitted entry and my daughter and I were informed that we were denied entry after much discussion indirectly with the interior ministry." Chomsky said the border officials were "very polite" as they "transmitted inquiries from the [Israeli] ministry of the interior". He said that he believed he was denied entry was for two reasons. "The government does not like the kind of things I say which puts them into the category of every other government in the world," he said. "The second was that they seemed upset about the fact that I was taking an invitation from Birzeit and I had no plans of speaking to any Israeli universities as I've done many times in the past, but not this time."

***'Misunderstanding'*** However, a spokeswoman at the Israeli interior ministry, which controls the country's borders, said Chomsky had not been allowed to cross the border due to misunderstanding. She said officials were trying to get clearance from the Israeli military, which controls access to the West Bank to allow Chomsky to enter. "We are trying to contact the military to clear things up and if they have no objection we see no reason why he should not be allowed in," Sabine Hadad told the Reuters news agency. Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian MP who had invited Chomsky to speak at the university's philosophy department, said the scholar had been detained at the border for five hours. "This act shows the nature of the Israeli government that is against freedom of speech, particularly from such a noted international figure like Chomsky," Barghouti said. Chomsky, 81, is a professor of linguistics at the US Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has frequently spoken out against Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories.

### **Ultra-Orthodox Israelis protest grave removal**

May 16, 2010 Israeli antiquities authorities operating under heavy police guard began relocating ancient graves on Sunday to make way for construction of a hospital emergency room, setting off protests from ultra-Orthodox Jews who say Jewish remains are being disturbed. Officers forcibly carried off dozens of demonstrators who had staged a sit-in to try to stop the work outside Barzilai Hospital in the southern city of Ashkelon. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said 15 protesters were arrested. Archaeologists have determined the graves belonged to Christians or pagans from the Byzantine period, about 1,400 years ago. But ultra-Orthodox Jews insist they are Jewish bones that should not be moved, in accordance with religious practice. A fence surrounding the hospital was topped by barbed wire to keep out demonstrators, and police set up checkpoints at the entrances to the city to ward off any major inflow of protesters. The operation, which got under way after weeks of political wrangling, took place under the guard of hundreds of police deployed in the area in anticipation of possible violence. But ultra-Orthodox rabbinical leaders did not call for a major protest, Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman told Israel Radio. After the graves were discovered, Israel's Cabinet — under pressure from ultra-Orthodox coalition members — voted to relocate the planned facility. But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reversed that decision. Ashkelon is not far from the Gaza Strip, and doctors had warned that if Palestinian militants again fire rockets at the city, the trip between the hospital and a separate emergency room would be dangerous. The relocation also would have cost millions of dollars.

### **Israel's trade club entry opposed**

Several renowned public figures have appealed to countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to delay a vote over Israel's membership scheduled for Monday. They said that while the OECD's objectives included promotion of world trade and economic development, "Israel allows only 81 items into Gaza, while Palestinians are not allowed to export their produce". The statement called for Israel to fulfil its obligations towards Palestinians under international law. Its signatories include Luisa Morgantini, former vice-president of the European parliament, Ronnie Kasrils, a former South African minister, and Stephane Hessel, a former French ambassador. They also called on Israel to abide fully with the OECD principles and benchmarks. Meanwhile, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, Israel's trade minister, accused Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister, of trying to block the country's bid to join the OECD. "We should not bring politics into organisations that deal with economics and trade," Ben-Eliezer said on Sunday. He said Fayyad's actions are especially serious coming at a time when Israel and the Palestinians are renewing peace talks. Fayyad, who is a respected economist with strong international contacts, had previously spoken out against Israel's bid for OECD membership. **Blatant complicity** Omar Barghouti, a founding member of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee (BNC), the organisation behind the public appeal, told Al Jazeera that by accepting Israel, OECD members would show a blatant complicity with Israeli war crimes, destroying the very foundations of international law. "Rewarding Israel entrenches its impunity and dashes any realistic hope for achieving a just peace in the region," Barghouti said. "Officials of OECD member states are perfectly aware that Israel does not comply with any of the objective criteria put forth." The 31-member OECD must vote unanimously to accept

new members and Israeli finance ministry officials said that, despite opposition from some members, they expect an approval on accession. "There are all kinds of countries with arguments, such as Norway, Switzerland, and Ireland, but these countries don't have a majority, and the near-universal consensus is in favour of Israel's accession," a finance ministry official said. Lars Ohly, chair of Sweden's Left Party, said at the party's congress on Sunday that the Palestinian people face one of the worst examples of double standards of morality in the world today. "The occupying state is rewarded with increased trade, with more military contacts, that it is now suggested that they become a member of the OECD ... This is a shame."**Convincing Turkey** A delegation from the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), a London based NGO, is expected to lobby the Turkish government on Monday to veto Israel's accession. Turkey is the only Muslim-majority country that is a member of the OECD, and the delegation hopes to meet Abdullah Gul, the president, and Recep Tayyeb Erdogan, the prime minister, to convince them to prevent Israel from joining the organisation. Seyfeddin Kara, IHRC head of campaigns, said: "Campaigners world-wide recognise that Israel's accession will give it a legitimacy it does not deserve and confer economic favours that will contribute to and accelerate the dispossession of the Palestinian people."