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Summary

Egypt

A prominent opposition journalist is to go on trial for allegedly libeling Egypt's foreign minister in a newspaper, a judicial source said Hamdy Qandil could face prison or a fine if found guilty of the charge of "insulting and libeling a public servant or citizen

performing their work," the source said. Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit filed a complaint against Qandil alleging that he insulted him in a piece he wrote in the independent daily Shorouk last May.

A call for election boycott by Egypt's most prominent opposition leader and former atomic energy watchdog Mohamed ElBaradie seems to have gone unnoticed for several opposition groups. However, Mohamed Mursi, the general spokesman for the outlawed organisation. While several political parties have not clarified whether they will take part in the parliamentary elections or not, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the nation's strongest-yet-banned opposition group, said it was actively preparing for the elections due next November.

A daughter of late President Anwar el-Sadat, who was killed by Muslim militants in 1981, has lodged a complaint with Egypt's Chief Prosecutor against prominent writer Mohamed Hassanein Heikal for raising suspicions that her father may have been involved in killing his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser. In his weekly programme on the Qatari news TV Al Jazira, Heikal, a confidant of Nasser, said that Sadat had fixed a cup of coffee three days before Nasser's death on September 28, 1970.

Al-Wafd Party has decided to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in November, sparking divisions among Egypt's opposition groups. In a general assembly meeting held on Friday by Al-Wafd Party, 56.7 percent voted for entering the People's Assembly (PA) elections, while 43 percent voted against it. "The general assembly made its decision based on the opinion of the majority of Al-Wafd Party members — it was a very close vote though, a large percentage of the party members voted to boycott the elections, which shows that there's anger towards the government and the ruling party and that we know these elections won't be fair," Mohamed Moustafa Shardy, Al-Wafd MP, told Daily News Egypt.

Egypt's al-Ghad party announces it is going to boycott parliamentary elections amid divisions in the opposition camp. Egypt's opposition al-Ghad party is boycotting November parliamentary elections, becoming the second political entity to boycott the anxiously awaited elections. Last week, former UN nuclear chief Mohamed ElBaradei, a potential candidate for president, said the elections would be rigged and anyone participating in the process would be going against the national will. A boycott of parliamentary elections could raise the stakes for a presidential vote in 2011, analysts say. President Hosni Mubarak, 82, has so far kept his intentions unknown, but many Egyptians believe he will try to lever his son Gamal, 46, into power if he does not. Both father and son have denied any succession plan, but officials from the ruling party have welcomed a Gamal and Mubarak.

Palestians and Israelis resume their negotiations in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. The talks, seen by many observers as the last chance for the two sides to resolve their decades-long conflict, come a few days before the expiry of a partial settlement freeze imposed by the Israeli government. **GIVE PEACE A CHANCE:** An Egyptian plain-clothes soldier walking past a welcome sign in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, South Sinai, Monday. Egypt Tuesday hosts the second round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Sharm. I hope Israel will seriously renew the freeze of settlement construction in the Palestinian territories," said Hossam Zaki, the spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.

The National Coalition of Opposition parties in Jordan engaged in dialogue discussing freedom of expression, public participation in the political process and economic difficulties facing the nation as a result of the government's incapable policies. The National Coalition of Opposition parties in Jordan engaged in dialogue discussing freedom of expression, public participation in the political process and economic difficulties facing the nation as a result of the government's incapable policies. According to the Muslim Brotherhood's offshoot the Islamic Action Front's leader Hamza Mansour, the situation was serious and a threat to the stability of the nation.

Economic front

Egypt's core inflation accelerated for a fourth straight month in August, reaching its fastest pace in more than a year. The measure, which excludes the prices of fruits and vegetables as well as regulated prices, increased to 8.2 percent from 7.1 percent in July, the Cairo-based central bank said on its website today. Core inflation was expected to accelerate to 7.2 percent, according to the median estimate of five economists surveyed by Bloomberg News.

Cyber news

As the technology sector continues expanding in Egypt, a concerted effort has been made to forge ahead in the field of nanotechnology. As well as capitalizing on the potential benefits of nanotechnology, Egypt is hoping to avoid falling through the crack of what scientists have termed the "nanodivide." Hassan Azzazy, professor and chairman of the chemistry department at the American University in Cairo (AUC), underscored the dilemma: "Egypt is falling behind," he said, as research and development only represent 0.5 percent of GDP, which is "miniscule." "Egypt must enter heavily into the field now, or risk losing out" by having to invest even more funds in the future to catch up to the west.

Google.org recently launched Health Speaks, an initiative which encourages community-based, crowd-sourced translations of health information with the assistance of Google Translator Toolkit. Health Speaks pilot programs for Arabic, Hindi and Swahili began last week and are supported with a donation incentive, awarding local charities with funds based on the number of words volunteers translate. The Health Speaks team has chosen hundreds of what they deemed good quality English-language health articles from Wikipedia for translation. Daily News Egypt sat down with Wael Ghonim, Google's product and marketing manager for the Middle East and North Africa, who is responsible for leading Google's product strategy in the region and help growing Arabic content online.

Water issue:

There is a battle over the historic river. Under existing accords, Egypt has veto power over development projects, but upstream nations say they should not be bound by unfair colonial-era pacts. *Nile struggle* Rice farmers in Egypt's Nile Delta have been ordered to plant on less land — this year's reduction is more than 900,000 acres — to conserve water. On the sloping western shores of Lake Tana in central Ethiopia, where villagers gape at new tractors as if they were Ferraris and power lines pass over lean-tos lighted by candles, a poor nation's hopes hum inside a new hydroelectric plant. Lured by the plant's promise of powering villages and irrigating 350,000 acres of farmland, intrepid investors are venturing across misty hills and navigating sprawling savannas.

Authorities have blocked off water purification stations along the Nile in southern Egypt to prevent some 100 tons of diesel oil that leaked from a barge from polluting drinking water, officials said Sunday. The vessel was docked in Aswan, some 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) south of Cairo, when low water levels caused it to tilt, partially submerge and leak 110 tons of diesel fuel into the Nile.

State-run daily Al-Ahram defended in an editorial publishing a doctored photo of the Mideast peace talks, which put President Hosni Mubarak in the front, saying it was “illustrative.” Last Tuesday, ahead of the second round the peace talks in Sharm El-Sheikh, the paper published doctored photo from the Washington talks earlier in the month.

Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Hani Helal supported a number of universities’ decision to ban faculty members wearing the niqab, or the full face veil, from giving lectures. “The faculty member who is wearing the niqab should sit at home or in her office communicating with her students through the telephone or videoconference,” said Helal during a visit to Cairo University and Ain Shams University on Saturday, stated official news portal, Egynews. He explained that interaction between the teacher and students during the learning process is essential, a component he says will be diminished if the professor is wearing niqab. Helal also pointed out that security guards at universities are working to protect the campus and only follow the administration’s instructions.

In another move to further expand their outreach to the public, Egypt’s biggest opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, created a social networking website, Ikhwanbook, equivalent to the popular Facebook. The aim of IkhwanBook is to “share your life with other Muslim brothers around the world,” as stated on the group’s official website, adding that the site wants to promote the concept of moderate Islam and to provide a forum for free discussions. This is not the first time the Muslim Brotherhood has created its own version of internationally recognized website. Websites such as IkhwanWiki, IkhwanGoogle and Ikhwantube are among its creations. However, Ikhwanbook is concerned with concepts such as privacy, security and decency, which have often come into question on Facebook, which has attracted more than 400 million users worldwide. In relation to decency, Muslim Brotherhood members said they are against groups and discussions that are offensive to Islam, citing the group created calling to mark May 20 as “Draw Mohammed Day” eliciting caricatures of the Muslim Prophet, which has attracted 81,306 fans. For Muslim Brotherhood MP Abdel Fattah Hassan, also a member of the PA’s culture committee, creating the social networking website is part of “taking action” against those who attack Islam.

Iraq

Iraqi Kurds have not delivered on promises to ship 100,000 barrels of oil a day to the outside world through Iraqi national pipeline network, the Oil Ministry said. The ministry’s spokesman, Assem Jihad, said the sides had reached an agreement under which the Kurds would have pumped the volume for exports. “The Ministry of Natural Resources in the (Kurdish) region has exhibited no sign of cooperation so far. It has not supplied us with 100,000 barrels we had agreed to be exported to the outside world,” Jihad said.

Production from Iraq’s major oil center of Kirkuk has reached 750,000 barrels a day, a success story in a country still trying to form a government six months after general

elections. The high production rate, according to an Oil Ministry source, has helped the country double exports from Kirkuk via Turkey. The source said Iraq's exports from northern fields were now in the range of 600,000 barrels from 300,000 to 350,000 previously. The current output rate from Kirkuk has been possible due to large investments in developing producing fields such as Bai Hassan, Jambour and Ujail.

One in every six Iraqis is an orphan. That is the toll Iraqi children are paying in a country which is supposedly under the occupation and protection of the world's only superpower. Not all the orphans are the result of the violence that swept the country in the aftermath of the 2003-U.S. invasion. But the invasion has caused untold miseries for Iraqis, surpassing those inflicted on them by their former tormentors, the clique that ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein. There were unconfirmed reports that Iraq has turned into a country of orphans. But the exact figure only became a reality recently, when the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs made public its own statistics. The statistics points to dangerous demographics with grave social, health and economic consequences for a country which still lacks basic infrastructure. These are the voiceless Iraqis.

Israel Palestine

US president says moratorium on Israeli settlement construction should be extended beyond September 26 expiry date. Barack Obama, the US president, has called for Israel to extend its partial freeze of the building of settlements on occupied Palestinian land to inject fresh momentum into newly-resumed Middle East peace talks. Speaking on Friday, Obama said that last week's launch of a new round of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians had "exceeded many people's expectations". But the president warned that the approaching expiry of a moratorium on Israeli construction of projects on Palestinian territory, which is due to end on September 26, could threaten the negotiations.

Clinton says both Israeli and Palestinian leaders "recognise time is not on either of their sides." [AFP] US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has urged both Israel and the Palestinians to find ways to clear the "hurdle" posed by a looming expiration of Jewish settlements. Flying to the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Shaikh, Clinton repeated US President Barack Obama's call on Friday for Israel to extend the 10-month moratorium on settlements that is due to expire on September 26. Clinton's message carried a sense of urgency, saying that the "time was ripe" for solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have met in Egypt for a second round of US-brokered direct negotiations against a backdrop of continued differences over Israel's plan to build more illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. No news emerged of any compromise on the settlements issue but Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, were reported to have held a "serious discussion" on core issues during talks in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Despite the challenges on the core issues - namely, Israel's security, the borders of a future Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the future of Jerusalem - the US peace envoy still believes a peace deal is possible within a year is possible.

Detailed news:

Egypt

Political front

Succession Gives Army a Stiff Test in Egypt

When a boiler at Military Factory 99 exploded in early August, killing one civilian worker and injuring six, a group of employees called a strike to demand safer working conditions, as they are entitled to do under Egyptian law. Yet, before the month was out, eight of them were on trial — in a military court — for “disclosing military secrets” and “illegally stopping production.” The message was unmistakable: the rules that apply to the rest of Egypt do not apply to the military, still the single most powerful institution in an autocratic state facing its toughest test in decades, an imminent presidential succession. President Hosni Mubarak has ruled Egypt with dictatorial powers for 29 years but is ill and not expected to continue in office after his current term expires in 2011. Retired officers, political activists and other analysts here say that the military’s show of force with the striking civilian workers was part of a concerted effort to put the military’s stamp on the choice of the next president. Technically, Egyptian voters will determine their next leader in the 2011 elections, but in practice the governing party’s candidate is almost certain to win. The real succession struggle will take place behind closed doors, and that is where the military would try to assure its continued status or even try to block Mr. Mubarak’s son Gamal. Military officials have expressed reservations in interviews and in the Egyptian news media about Gamal Mubarak, one of the most frequently mentioned potential successors of the president. Retired officers and other analysts said the military would not support his candidacy without ironclad guarantees that it would retain its pre-eminent position in the nation’s affairs. Retired officers circulated an open letter criticizing Gamal Mubarak’s candidacy last month, and several retired Egyptian officers said in interviews that they were skeptical of hereditary succession. The military has much to lose in the transition, these officers and analysts say. Over the years, one-man rule eviscerated Egypt’s civilian institutions, creating a vacuum at the highest levels of government that the military willingly filled. “There aren’t any civilian institutions to fall back on,” said Michael Hanna, a fellow at the Century Foundation who has written about the Egyptian military. “It’s an open question how much power the military has, and they might not even know themselves.” The beneficiary of nearly \$40 billion in American aid over the last 30 years, the Egyptian military has turned into a behemoth that controls not only security and a burgeoning defense industry, but has also branched into civilian businesses like road and housing construction, consumer goods and resort management. The military has built a highway from Cairo to the Red Sea; manufactures stoves and refrigerators for export; it even produces olive oil and bottled spring water. When riots broke out during bread shortages in March 2008, the army stepped in and distributed bread from its own bakeries, burnishing its reputation as Egypt’s least corrupt and most efficient state institution. “In times of crisis, they are there,” Salah Eissa, editor of a government-run weekly, Al Qahira, said in an interview. “That’s why you see some people today go as far as to call for military rule.” To enhance their power and prestige, the armed forces cloak themselves in a veil of secrecy, answering directly to the president, not the prime minister or cabinet. They have ignored calls in Parliament for budget transparency. The names of the general officers are not published, nor is the military’s size, which is considered a

state secret (observers estimate the ranks at 300,000 to 400,000). The military interprets its writ broadly. A retired army general, Hosam Sowilam, recently said the army would step in “with force if necessary” to stop the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group, from ascending to power. He added that the military still considered Israel a primary threat, even though the two nations had been at peace for more three decades. “We shall obey the president because he will be accepted by the people,” General Sowilam said in an interview. “But we will not accept any interference by the political parties into our military affairs.” While the military is not expected to dictate the governing party’s candidate, Egyptian political observers said it held an informal veto power over who rose to the top of the country’s power pyramid. “The military is seen as the only institution that is able to block succession in Egypt,” said Issandr el-Amrani, a close observer of Egyptian affairs who writes the Arabist blog. At the same time, the military does not want to be seen as dictating political events. “They are the only and primary force in Egypt right now,” said George Ishak, a member of the secular opposition group National Association for Change. “We do not wish for the military institution to play a political role in supporting anyone over anyone.” The defense minister, Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, always appears on the very short list of possible successors to President Mubarak, along with another septuagenarian contender, the intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman. Nevertheless, Gamal Mubarak, who has risen quickly through the governing National Democratic Party, is presumed by many to be the heir apparent; speculation intensified last week when he accompanied his father to Washington for the opening of Middle East peace talks, even though Gamal Mubarak has no official government position. But many in the military chafe at the idea of a Gamal Mubarak presidency, especially as he ascends to the office through the kind of heavily manipulated ballots to which Egypt has grown accustomed. If he wants to succeed his father, said Mohamed Kadry Said, a retired general, he must win in “clean elections.” Much of the military’s distrust of Gamal Mubarak stems from his ties to a younger generation of ruling party cadres who have made fortunes in the business world. The military is tied to the National Democratic Party’s “old guard,” a substantially less wealthy elite who made their careers as ministers, officers and apparatchiks. Military officers said they feared that Gamal Mubarak might erode the military’s institutional powers. “Of course the military has become jealous they are not the only big bosses now,” said General Said. “They feel threatened by the business community.” General Said, the military adviser to the government’s Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, still works closely with the defense establishment. He says that he believes a military coup is “not an option,” but that he thinks that President Mubarak’s successor, whether Gamal Mubarak or someone else, will have to convince the military that its position in the Egyptian power structure will remain secure. And that is likely to include a place in the business affairs of the country. Military Factory 99, for example, produces a variety of consumer goods — stainless steel pots and pans, fire extinguishers, scales, cutlery — in addition to its primary function of forging metal components for heavy ammunition. In the end, the military court dealt leniently with the strikers. After a quick trial, three were acquitted and the five others received suspended sentences. But the military had made its point. “There are no labor strikes in military society,” General Sowilam said. “If they don’t want to obey our rules, let them try their luck in the civilian world.”

Pro-ElBaradei journalist faces criminal trial over minister insult

A prominent opposition journalist is to go on trial for allegedly libeling Egypt's foreign minister in a newspaper, a judicial source said Hamdy Qandil could face prison or a fine if found guilty of the charge of "insulting and libeling a public servant or citizen performing their work," the source said. Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit filed a complaint against Qandil alleging that he insulted him in a piece he wrote in the independent daily Shorouk last May. Qandil could not be reached for comment, but the official MENA news agency reported prosecutors as saying that he did not intend to insult the minister. It quoted Qandeel as saying that "Abul Gheit's statements during the last years were uncalculated." In his article, Qandil criticized statements made by Abul Gheit, saying that "words usually drop from his (Abul Gheit's) mouth like garbage from a perforated rubbish bag." Qandil, long known for his pan-Arabism sentiments, used to host a number of television shows including several programs on state-controlled television stations. Qandil joined earlier this year ranks with the National Association for Change, a loose opposition coalition headed by former head of UN nuclear watchdog Mohamed ElBaradei. Later, several media outlets quoted Qandil as criticizing ElBaradei's "short stays in Egypt." Media experts have recently voiced concerns over referring a growing number of Egyptian journalists to criminal courts. In June, the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) appealed to Egypt's Minister of Finance Boutros Ghali to drop criminal charges against two journalists from a weekly independent newspaper. Ghali had filed the charges against Wael el-Ibrashy, editor-in-chief of Sawt al-Umma, and Samar el-Dawi, a reporter, whom he accused of inciting the public to reject a new property tax law drafted by the government in 2009.

According to the New York-based media watchdog, el-Ibrashy is to be trialed under a penal code article that has been mainly applied to "prosecute armed and militant groups in the past".

Egyptian opposition split over upcoming elections

ElBaradei's call to boycott remains largely unanswered; generational gap among opposition supporters over whether to avoid or participate in elections. Almost a week after Egyptian Presidential candidate Mohammed ElBaradei called on Egyptians last week to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for October, it is still unclear whether Egypt's opposition parties will heed ElBaradei call. A statement issued on Thursday by the National Association for Change, an opposition umbrella group led by ElBaradei, asked voters to boycott the parliamentary elections for what it dubbed "the absence of any real assurances that they will not be forged." The statement went on to say that participation in the elections would grant them "false legitimacy for forging the will of the Egyptian people." Jamal Fadel, head of ElBaradei's campaign in the city of Aswan, said that transparent elections were a precondition for ElBaradei's participation. "[ElBaradei] is trying to tell both Egyptians and political parties to boycott the elections," he told the Media Line. "If there will be no change in the election mechanism before the presidential elections, I believe Dr. ElBaradei will withdraw his candidacy." ElBaradei, along with a coalition of opposition parties including the Muslim Brotherhood, have circulated an online petition of seven demands, among which are a more transparent election process with international monitors and the cancellation of Egypt's emergency laws. Nearly one million Egyptians have already signed the petition, ElBaradei's website

is claims. But despite all the boycott brouhaha, most of Egypt's opposition parties have yet to publicly endorse the ElBaradei boycott. "The most important test [for ElBaradei] is whether the Muslim Brotherhood decides to participate in the elections," Elijah Zarwan, a Cairo-based senior analyst with the International Crisis Group told The Media Line. "In the past, the Brotherhood had trouble even registering candidates, after the government prevented them from doing so." The Muslim Brotherhood has not officially announced whether it intends to boycott the elections. Zarwan said that legally ElBaradei cannot currently run for President. "A constitutional amendment introduced in 2007 stipulated that any presidential candidate must be a member of a legal Egyptian political party for at least one year prior to elections in order to run," he said. The constitution also requires the candidate to collect 250 signatures from local and national political officials supporting his candidacy. "In practice, these rules mean the endorsement of the ruling party," Zarwan said. The National Democratic Party (NDP), Egypt's ruling party, was founded in 1978 by President Anwar Sadat. The NDP has been chaired by President Hosni Mubarak since 1981. With 317 seats out of the 444 in the People's Assembly (Egypt's Parliament), the NDP holds a solid majority. Dalia Ziada, a political activist and director of the American Islamic Congress in Cairo, said she believed the decision to boycott the elections was wrong. "This is the easy way out," she told the Media Line. "To participate in the elections and take the risk of being harassed by the government in order to show the forgeries is the hard way." Ziada said she believed the decision to boycott the elections stemmed from the weakness of opposition parties, adding that the opposition was divided along generational lines over the question of an electoral boycott. "These parties have neither the power nor the money to take the risk," she said. "Younger opposition members want to participate, whereas the older ones want to boycott." Ziada said that opposition leader Ayman Nour, leader of Al-Ghad party and a former presidential candidate, was undecided about boycotting the elections. He announced his ambiguous position following a meeting with ElBaradei, saying he would consult his party members on the matter.

MB 'not committed' to vote boycott

A call for election boycott by Egypt's most prominent opposition leader and former atomic energy watchdog Mohamed ElBaradie seems to have gone unnoticed for several opposition groups. However, Mohamed Mursi, the general spokesman for the outlawed organisation. While several political parties have not clarified whether they will take part in the parliamentary elections or not, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the nation's strongest-yet-banned opposition group, said it was actively preparing for the elections due next November. "We actively prepare for the elections across Egypt in the full belief that we'll take part in it," said Hussein Ibrahim, a member of the Brotherhood's Parliamentary Block. "We'll continue to do this as long as there isn't a decision from the top echelons of the group to the contrary," he told The Egyptian Gazette Online in an interview. The Brotherhood, which managed to win a fifth of the seats in Parliament in 2005, said earlier that it was debating a boycott to the elections, which will be held in November. However, Mohamed Mursi, the general spokesman for the outlawed organisation, said his movement was not committed to ElBaradie's decisions. "ElBaradie's National Association for Change makes recommendations, not binding

decisions,” Mursi said in statements to the media. The lack of clarity on whether the opposition will boycott the forthcoming elections reflects deep divisions in this opposition, observers say. ElBaradie believes that if political movements, parties, and powers boycotted the elections, the ruling National Democratic Party would feel obliged to succumb to reform demands.

Sadat daughter goes to court

A daughter of late President Anwar el-Sadat, who was killed by Muslim militants in 1981, has lodged a complaint with Egypt's Chief Prosecutor against prominent writer Mohamed Hassanein Heikal for raising suspicions that her father may have been involved in killing his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser. In his weekly programme on the Qatari news TV Al Jazira, Heikal, a confidant of Nasser, said that Sadat had fixed a cup of coffee three days before Nasser's death on September 28, 1970. "Heikal said that Sadat had fixed the coffee for Abdel Nasser after asking the chef to leave the kitchen, a story that implies an unequivocal accusation to Sadat of poisoning and killing Abdel Nasser," Roqia, the eldest daughter of Sadat said in her complaint. Some years ago, a Cairo court ordered a daughter of Nasser to pay LE150,000 in damages to Roqia after the former made a similar accusation.

Al-Wafd says to participate in PA elections, opposition divided

Al-Wafd Party has decided to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in November, sparking divisions among Egypt's opposition groups. In a general assembly meeting held on Friday by Al-Wafd Party, 56.7 percent voted for entering the People's Assembly (PA) elections, while 43 percent voted against it. "The general assembly made its decision based on the opinion of the majority of Al-Wafd Party members — it was a very close vote though, a large percentage of the party members voted to boycott the elections, which shows that there's anger towards the government and the ruling party and that we know these elections won't be fair," Mohamed Moustafa Shardy, Al-Wafd MP, told Daily News Egypt. "We realize we are not participating in a democratic environment and we are not letting go of our demands for change, but what does it say when we call on people to vote for their future, while we sit at home and boycott the elections," he added. Former IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei has led a call for boycotting the elections through the National Association for Change if his demands for change and democracy are not met by the government. These demands include an end to the emergency law, judicial oversight and independent monitoring of elections in a bid to guarantee transparent and free elections. "We have always supported the idea that all opposition groups should boycott the elections, so the move would be effective and embarrass the government that claims to be democratic and diverse political parties," Karima Al-Hifnawy, member of the National Association for Change and the Kefaya opposition movement, told Daily News Egypt. "We refuse to participate in the charade called elections and forge the will of the people to accommodate the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), that's our opinion, but we can't force it on others," she added. Shardy disagreed, however, saying that "all those who have called for boycotting the elections are either groups or NGOs, no political parties have made that demand, and that's because the main difference between a political party and an NGO is that a party participates in the elections, whether it is parliamentary or presidential." The spokesman of the MB parliamentary bloc, Hamdy

Hassan, told Daily News Egypt that the Muslim Brotherhood is more likely to enter the race for seats in the PA. "We said before that if all the opposition parties decided to boycott the [PA] elections, then we would as well so the boycott is effective, but there have been divisions among opposition powers," he said. "Boycotting the elections isn't in the people's best interest now, boycotting only succeeds in pressuring a democratic regime that respects opposition powers, but the current government will be exhilarated if we boycott the elections so it can win the majority of seats without even a fight," he added. MB members ran as independent candidates in 2005 and won 88 seats, representing the largest opposition group in the PA. On the other hand, head of Al-Ghad Party, Ayman Nour supported the boycott. "Participating in the coming elections means participating in its forgery and accepting its results, we will not enter elections without guarantees of its transparency and integrity," Nour told Daily News Egypt. Earlier last week Al-Ghad opposition party decided to boycott the elections, though Nour did not rule out the possibility of members running as independents. "We abided by the decision of the National Association for Change and with what we believe is in the people's best interest," Nour said. "However Article 64 of the constitution gives citizens the right to run in the elections, so if any of our members run, they will run as independents without the party's support, but we will not expel them from the party for practicing their constitutional right," he added. Shardy believes that the coming PA elections won't see that much forgery, however it will see "a lot of confrontation, money and blood."

Egypt's youth build new opposition movement

Inside a small apartment tucked away in a middle class Cairo neighborhood, a trainer teaches a dozen volunteers of a budding opposition movement the basics of political organization — communication, recruiting, gathering signatures. The instructors draw inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and download books from American scholar Gene Sharp, whose tactics of civil disobedience influenced public uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, Iran and elsewhere. Over the past six months, about 15,000 of these volunteers have formed the kernel of a burgeoning youth opposition movement in Egypt who are pinning their hopes for leadership on Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel peace laureate and former chief of UN's nuclear watchdog agency. ElBaradei's return to his homeland Egypt in February infused opponents of President Hosni Mubarak's nearly three-decade rule with a new energy. They hoped that with his calls for democratic reform, he could compete for the presidency in the elections expected in fall 2011. But they have come up against a hard reality. Egypt's opposition is fractious and co-opted and not even a respected figure like ElBaradei stands much chance of uniting them into a real force for change ahead of a parliamentary vote just months away or even in time for the presidential elections. So ElBaradei's followers are trying something new: harnessing people power. "We need an overarching dream to make us feel part of something," said 18-year-old Abdul-Rahman Salah, who was among volunteers receiving training in political organization. "People are starting to change." Next year's presidential vote is heavy with uncertainty. It is far from clear whether the ailing 82-year-old Mubarak will run again, or push forward his son, Gamal, 46. The powerful intelligence chief — Mubarak aide Omar Suleiman — is also cited as another possibility. ElBaradei has said he won't run unless conditions for the race are made more fair. But he says he hopes that by 2011 his campaign will be an effective

force in the country's politics. Few groups in Egypt have ever managed to channel widespread popular dissatisfaction into a credible political challenge. Egypt's recognized opposition parties are paper facades, funded by the government with almost no popular base and only a few token parliament seats. The ruling party, which monopolizes power, operates by patronage and backroom deals. Hampering the creation of any popular movement is a pervasive security apparatus that keeps close tabs on dissent, often disperses protests by force and co-opts party leaders. Also, change is locked out by the political process. Rigging ensures ruling party victories in elections. No party can be created without government permission. Recognized parties can field candidates for president, but independents — like ElBaradei — can run only after an approval process that effectively gives the ruling party a veto. People power has only really been used in Egypt with any success by the opposition Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, which is technically outlawed but possesses an extensive social services network and grassroots organization. But coordinators say they intend their new campaign, managed from the small office in Cairo's Mohandiseen neighborhood, to one day be at the heart of a civil disobedience movement that will take on the Mubarak regime. So far, they have focused on gathering signatures online for a petition ElBaradei launched four months ago. The aim is to show the extent of public support behind his call for electoral reforms and constitutional amendments to allow for fair elections. The Muslim Brotherhood is helping in the campaign, though it and ElBaradei's supporters may seem like strange bedfellows. So far, the petition has collected 800,000 signatures, nearly 700,000 of them secured through the Brotherhood website, a sign of how its network dwarfs that of the nascent group in this country of nearly 80 million. Critics warn that the alliance with the Brotherhood may drown liberal voices and drive away potential supporters wary of Islamist ideology. But the campaign organizers appear unfazed. Coordinator Abdul-Rahman Youssef said keeping close to Egypt's most organized group has its benefits, especially when the demands are as fundamental as a free ballot box. "No one faction can organize civil disobedience alone," he said. Government-sanctioned opposition parties are more suspicious of ElBaradei. They have rejected his call for a boycott of November's elections for the 500-seat parliament, which he says will surely be rigged. Some dismiss a boycott as a "risky" option that would benefit the government. "ElBaradei is most responsible for confusing the situation," said Rifaat Saeed, the octogenarian head of a left-wing party with just two seats in parliament. Another 9,000 volunteers are to be trained or have applied to join the campaign of ElBaradei supporters. After operating mainly online, volunteers have started going door-to-door to gather signatures and reach out to people, following the ideas of Sharp. In his writings, Sharp offers nearly 200 methods for protesters to pressure authoritarian regimes, from adopting symbolic colors to staging mass strikes. Egypt's new movement has not implemented Sharp's more dramatic steps yet. But ElBaradei said he won't hesitate to call for civil disobedience if the government remains intransigent. In the meantime, they have successfully avoided heavy arrests by security services. "So long as we appear weak, the security agencies will leave us alone," said Ahmed Ezz, the lead trainer. "We just want a space to breathe, to be free, and we are looking to create a trend." Amr El-Choubaki, a political analyst at the Al-Ahram Center think tank, said the signature campaign is impressive, and such steps to gauge public opinion and set up a structure are new for Egypt's opposition. But, he cautions, "no one has an answer to what the next step would be."

Egyptian party boycotts elections

Egypt's al-Ghad party announces it is going to boycott parliamentary elections amid divisions in the opposition camp. Egypt's opposition al-Ghad party is boycotting November parliamentary elections, becoming the second political entity to boycott the anxiously awaited elections. Last week, former UN nuclear chief Mohamed ElBaradei, a potential candidate for president, said the elections would be rigged and anyone participating in the process would be going against the national will. A boycott of parliamentary elections could raise the stakes for a presidential vote in 2011, analysts say. President Hosni Mubarak, 82, has so far kept his intentions unknown, but many Egyptians believe he will try to lever his son Gamal, 46, into power if he does not. Both father and son have denied any succession plan, but officials from the ruling party have welcomed a Gamal and Mubarak bid. "We respect the opinion of ElBaradei in the boycott," Ghad chairman Ayman Nour said after his party voted overwhelmingly against participation. "This man is a great weight in the process of change, and we respect him." Nour ran against President Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections, coming in a distant second. He was jailed shortly after that for submitting forged documents in the process of setting up Ghad, charges he says were politically motivated. The liberal Ghad party hopes that a united opposition to the vote would deny legitimacy to the ruling party, and representatives of Egypt's Kefaya movement and the communist party joined it at Tuesday's meeting. Ghad co-founder Wael Nawara told reporters: "We will break out of the rules of this game and lay down new rules. We will work to create a new parliament and a new constitution." Calls for an election boycott in November grew louder after an upper house vote in June saw Mubarak's ruling party sweep most seats. Rights groups complained of abuses, while the government insisted the vote was fair. But Egypt's opposition force remains divided, with the Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest opposition bloc with 88 seats in parliament, and nationalist liberal Wafd party, saying they will participate in the upcoming elections.

Constitutional dispute Egyptian government angered opposition parties when it amended article 76 in the constitution in 2007. The amendment stipulates that the head of state must be elected by general, direct ballot. Confrontation between the government and opposition has gone beyond the standards of political rivalry ever since. Candidates of political parties should secure the approval of at least 250 members of the elected councils, the People's Assembly, the Shoura Council, and local People's Councils across the country, which means at least 65 members of the People's Council, at least 25 members of the Shoura Council, and at least 25 members of local People's Councils in 14 out of 29 governorates.

Geo strategic front

Intelligence chief meets Hamas leader

Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman met Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in Saudi Arabia this month in an attempt to push for reconciliation between Palestinian factions, the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat reported Sunday. Forging Palestinian unity is seen as crucial to any prospect for a Palestinian state based on peace with Israel. But the Islamist group Hamas has so far rejected a pact proposed by Egypt to end its row with President

Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah group. Direct talks between Palestinians and Israelis were launched this month in Washington, aiming for a peace deal in a year but are already stuck over Israeli settlement building on occupied land. Hamas, which controls Gaza, opposes talks with Israel. "The deadlock over the reconciliation dossier does not benefit Hamas and will reflect negatively on it as the division (between factions) persists," a senior Egyptian source was quoted in the London-based newspaper on Sunday as saying. Abbas's Fatah, which holds sway in self-rule areas of the West Bank, signed the Egyptian pact proposed in October 2009. Hamas did not, demanding guarantees it would be recognised and no embargo imposed on it if it won a future election. Hamas has refused to recognise agreements Fatah signed with Israel and has been locked in a power struggle with the formerly dominant Palestinian faction since winning an election four years ago. Israel tightened a blockade on Gaza after that vote. Suleiman held the talks with Meshaal in Mecca on the sidelines of an official visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met King Abdullah to brief him on the first round of peace talks. The source quoted by al-Hayat said Gaza could "become a rebellious region" and said Egypt was ready to host fresh reconciliation talks when Hamas was ready to sign the pact. Arab League countries called on the Palestinians last week to settle their differences to strengthen their hand in peace talks.

‘Last-chance’ ME talks resume in Sharm

Palestians and Israelis Tuesday resume their negotiations in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. The talks, seen by many observers as the last chance for the two sides to resolve their decades-long conflict, come a few days before the expiry of a partial settlement freeze imposed by the Israeli government. ***GIVE PEACE A CHANCE:*** An Egyptian plain-clothes soldier walking past a welcome sign in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, South Sinai, Monday. Egypt Tuesday hosts the second round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Sharm. I hope Israel will seriously renew the freeze of settlement construction in the Palestinian territories," said Hossam Zaki, the spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.

He added Monday that Israel should be convinced that to keep the negotiating process on track, there should be no new settlements. "Any new settlement construction will gravely harm negotiations and this cast a shadow over Israel's seriousness and credibility concerning the resumption of concerning the resumption of negotiations," added the official. He said that Egypt was exerting efforts to this end, without elaborating. Egypt was the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1978. Meanwhile, authorities tightened their security measures in the Sinai Peninsula ahead of Tuesday's peace talks in Sharm el-Sheikh. Security forces were adding checkpoints along the main roads on the peninsula and beefing up the staffing at the roadblocks, South Sinai Governor Mohamed Abdelfadil Shousha told the German Press Agency (dpa). Talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are set to begin Tuesday. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton will moderate the negotiations along with Washington's envoy George Mitchell. After the Sharm part of the talks, the parties will head to occupied Jerusalem to continue the round. In an appearance last week at the Council on Foreign Relations, Clinton was asked why those who see little chance of reaching a settlement in the one-year deadline Obama has set are wrong. "I think they're wrong because I think that both sides and both leaders

recognise that there may not ever be another chance," she replied. The "last chance" notion is based in part on the knowledge that Abbas is living on borrowed time, in a political sense. His electoral mandate expired in 2009 and he fears a Hamas takeover of the West Bank, which is supposed to make up the bulk of an independent Palestinian state. Time is a motivating factor for the Israelis, too. Some Israelis believe the longer that Israel occupies the West Bank and its growing Arab population, the more Israel's future as a Jewish state is imperilled. Creating a sovereign Palestine would get Israel out of the occupation business.

Jordan MBH

Jordan: MB offshoot and political opposition express deep concern over gov't policies

The National Coalition of Opposition parties in Jordan engaged in dialogue discussing freedom of expression, public participation in the political process and economic difficulties facing the nation as a result of the government's incapable policies. The National Coalition of Opposition parties in Jordan engaged in dialogue discussing freedom of expression, public participation in the political process and economic difficulties facing the nation as a result of the government's incapable policies. According to the Muslim Brotherhood's offshoot the Islamic Action Front's leader Hamza Mansour, the situation was serious and a threat to the stability of the nation. The meeting which was organized to address government policies on several issues, including freedom of speech and the right to form professional unions ended with the coalition's unanimous decision to take a number of measures to "confront official policies" on the issues discussed. The controversial Cyber Crimes Law and the establishment of a teachers union topped the list of priorities especially as the law is an infringement of the right to free expression. Mansour highlighted that they fully support freedom of opinion based on responsibility and respect. He maintained that opposition leaders expressed extreme concern over the recent taxes on a number of items and other economic measures which distressed the middle class. A press conference is scheduled to take place in the next few days to publicize procedures to "expose" official policies responsible in increasing the burden on the middle class.

Jordan teachers threaten to boycott elections

A statement issued on Saturday, by the Amman Teachers' Committee in Jordan criticized Dr. Khaled Al Karaki, the new Education Minister for failing to correct mistakes made by former Education minister Ibrahim Badran. A statement issued on Saturday, by the Amman Teachers' Committee in Jordan criticized Dr. Khaled Al Karaki, the new Education Minister for failing to correct mistakes made by former Education minister Ibrahim Badran. The statement highlighted that teachers who were initially optimistic were disappointed after Al Karaki maintained that the ministry has no intention to repeal the "arbitrary" measures practiced against teachers, including early retirement and moving teachers to distant school districts. Teachers retaliated arguing they had a constitutional right to revive a professional association, asserting that they will continue calling for their demands of establishing the association that would safeguard their rights and regulate their affairs. The teachers ascertained they were seriously contemplating

boycotting the upcoming parliamentary elections to illustrate their anger. The boycott decision will amplify the opposing national movement's stance of boycotting the elections slated for November 9, including the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot the Islamic Action Front, the Retired Military Personnel Committee, and the Popular Unity Political Party, among others.

Jordan gov't accepts IAF boycott of elections but refuses to discuss electoral procedures

Jordan's government refuses to discuss polls procedures but respects the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot the Islamic Action Front's choice to boycott November's parliamentary elections. Elections Spokesperson Samih Maaytah asserted that the IAF had the right to boycott elections after they believed that the regime lacked the integrity required to run free and fair elections. Although sources have reported the IAF Shura council's decision to boycott the polls, there have been rumours that the Islamist officials wish to conduct open dialogue to bridge the gap between the two sides calling for guarantees that the polls will be held in a transparent manner under the supervision of an independent party. Maaytah has alleged that the government is currently in the last stages of arrangements for the polls and is unable to review the law to conciliate the Islamist movement or any other party whose demands have come too late. IAF MP Tayseer Fityani however has ascertained that the party has been calling for dialogue with the government for over two years claiming that they believe the government does not wish to have opposition parties in parliament in order to pass laws without interference by Islamists. He maintained that the elections' transparency is bound by the law, which sets restrictions and regulations to ensure the elections are conducted in a fair and free manner. He added that the elections will be monitored by the National Centre for Human Rights and other organizations, which can report any irregularities. Political analysts assert that if the IAF hold true to their decision, the boycott will definitely have a significant impact on voter turnout as well as the shape of the upcoming Parliament.

Jordan's MB offshoot denounces French niqab ban

France's ban on the full-face veils has been deeply condemned by the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in Jordan who described the ban as an "affront" to dignity. France's ban on the niqab has been deeply condemned by the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in Jordan who described the ban as an "affront" to dignity. In a statement to AFP, The Islamic Action Front's secretary general Hamza Mansour stressed that the ban kills freedoms asserting that; "The West claims to be a protector of freedom and human dignity, but this is untrue and has nothing to do with reality". Mansour alleged that France's policies did nothing for world peace. He questioned the double standards of France where nudity is allowed in public areas whereas the niqab is banned. The French parliament under Sarkozy's government passed a law on Tuesday which prevented Muslim women from wearing the full-face veil in public.

MB offshoot in Jordan meets with Prime Minister

Jordan's Prime Minister Samir Rifai is expected to meet with leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot the Islamic Action Front on Saturday to discuss numerous issues. Jordan's Prime Minister Samir Rifai is expected to meet with leaders from the Muslim

Brotherhood offshoot the Islamic Action Front on Saturday to discuss numerous issues. IAF leaders have asserted that everything will be out in the open during discussions including the reasons behind their decision to boycott November's upcoming parliamentary elections which came about as a result of the lack of dialogue with the government. Rifai asserted that the government has apparently taken the necessary initiatives to guarantee free and fair elections, in accordance to requests from King Abdullah. During a visit to the Professional Association earlier this week he alleged that the government was open to all "practical" suggestions that would facilitate the parliamentary electoral process. According to the Premier the ball is now in the MB's where court he stressed 'they should come up with "practical suggestions", other than amending the Elections Law, since any review of the law would not be feasible now and would only mean postponing the elections, thus leaving a long legislative vacuum in the country that no political party can desire'. He maintained that the Islamists are an inseparable part of the Jordanian social and political fabric where he called on them to demonstrate good intentions and hold national interests above anything else.

Economic front

Egyptian Core Inflation Accelerates to Fastest Pace in More Than a Year

Egypt's core inflation accelerated for a fourth straight month in August, reaching its fastest pace in more than a year. The measure, which excludes the prices of fruits and vegetables as well as regulated prices, increased to 8.2 percent from 7.1 percent in July, the Cairo-based central bank said on its website today. Core inflation was expected to accelerate to 7.2 percent, according to the median estimate of five economists surveyed by Bloomberg News. "There was a very sharp rise in food prices," said Mohamed Abu Basha, an economist at Cairo-based investment bank EFG-Hermes Holding SAE. "The rate is slightly above the comfort zone of the central bank but I expect they will leave rates unchanged as some of the food inflation may reflect seasonal effects due to Ramadan." Economists at Cairo-based investment bank Beltone Financial and EFG-Hermes say the central's banks "comfort zone" is between 6 percent and 8 percent. Abu Basha said a change in the weighting of the basket used to measure inflation made it difficult to accurately assess the situation. Headline inflation, which the central bank uses to calculate the core measure, accelerated to 10.9 percent in August from 10.7 percent in the previous month, the state-run statistics agency said on Sept. 8. The central bank, which meets on Sept. 16 to review its monetary policy, has kept its overnight deposit interest rate unchanged at 8.25 percent since September last year as core inflation has remained subdued and economic growth has accelerated. The economy of the most populous Arab country expanded at an annual rate of 5.9 percent in the second quarter of 2010. For the fiscal year that ended in June, the economy grew 5.3 percent compared with 4.7 percent in the previous 12 months.

Sureclean forges alliance with Tipico to expand Egypt market

Sureclean, a UK-based industrial cleaning and waste management company, recently injected \$2 million into its Egypt operations by forging a strategic alliance with a local company, Tipico, a subsidiary of Integrated Petroleum Services (IPS). Another \$1 million is already on the way in the form of equipment to provide another boost to the alliance — which will focus on the Middle East and North Africa region — whose core client base

consists of offshore oil drilling companies, such as Transocean and Prime. Waleed Geassa, chairman and CEO of IPS, underscored the value his company would bring to the table: “We have the contacts and infrastructure to guarantee to Sureclean,” he said. Richard McDonald, general manager of Sureclean, explained why they chose to expand in Egypt, saying, “It offers a great strategic, geographical location, situated between the Mediterranean Sea and Gulf countries, which allows us to mobilize equipment more cheaply and faster.” Affordability and efficiency “have been the secret to our success for the last two to three months,” he continued. On average, an offshore oil rig, McDonald explained, earns up to \$180,000 per day. Thus, the oil rig operator loses that amount per day, while the service company cleans and prepares the rig for continued operations. The advantage in contracting the Sureclean and Tipico alliance, he said, is that it can prepare an oil rig to be up and running in five days for \$100,000 versus a local competitor, which will charge a meager \$40,000, but will require eight days to complete the same job. In saving three days, he explained, an oil rig will be back online sooner, meaning its parent company will save money by getting back to earning profits. In this scenario, the hypothetical savings of \$480,000 are non-negligible. Boasting such an offering, after just two and a half months, the alliance has made \$400,000 in turnover, “which is a great achievement,” Geassa stated. Although the company currently represents 10 percent of the national market, it is aiming to raise that figure to 40 percent by the end of the year, and within two years it is betting that it can snatch 20 percent of the regional market, McDonald indicated. At present, there are 23 oil rigs in Egypt and a total of 180 in the region, Geassa and McDonald noted. With a worldwide market that McDonald estimates to be valued at between \$2 billion to \$3 billion, the alliance’s target is expected to net \$1.5-2 million in profits by the end the year — if its pipeline deals are realized, and \$5 million in turnover by the end of 2011. Sureclean and Tipico have already signed Master Service Agreements with all of the major offshore oil drilling companies in Egypt — a sign that augurs well for the duo. Although the reasons for entering the regional market are palpable, Sureclean felt that for it to succeed, the company would need local talent and knowledge. To this end, Sureclean sought a local partner it could trust, and one that could ensure that its books were transparent. Geassa’s company fit the bill. Sharing resources between partners is critical as well since austerity and budget tightening due to the economic malaise have become the order of the day, McDonald said. As such it makes more economical sense to hire a local versus an expatriate: “An expatriate employee costs 100 percent more than a local engineer,” McDonald underscored. Not only do local personnel cost less, they also have insider knowledge of the terrain due to being part of the local culture and speaking the language of the country, which gives any firm a competitive advantage, he continued. “There have been many failures,” because previous companies entered the Egyptian market with the wrong team, consisting primarily of expatriates, McDonald pointed out. Egyptians hired by the alliance will also win big, he noted, as they end up earning a salary that is two to three times the level what they would with a local firm. Also, employees that enter the alliance at the lower end of the company’s structure and who show serious promise to climb the internal ladder could count on the alliance forking out the necessary funds to pay for training and further studies. Already, the company has brought on board 20 employees, with another 12 due next week. In addition to having access to an affordable pool of talent as well as the critically strategic location of the country, the Egyptian government, McDonald told, has

implemented a series of business-friendly foreign direct investment laws, which have been instrumental toward enticing his business to the country. All of which, in his view, have made Egypt the “economic tiger” of Africa.

Egypt seeks to bridge the nanotechnology divide

As the technology sector continues expanding in Egypt, a concerted effort has been made to forge ahead in the field of nanotechnology. As well as capitalizing on the potential benefits of nanotechnology, Egypt is hoping to avoid falling through the crack of what scientists have termed the “nanodivide.” Hassan Azzazy, professor and chairman of the chemistry department at the American University in Cairo (AUC), underscored the dilemma: “Egypt is falling behind,” he said, as research and development only represent 0.5 percent of GDP, which is “miniscule.” “Egypt must enter heavily into the field now, or risk losing out” by having to invest even more funds in the future to catch up to the west. “The longer we wait, the harder it will be,” Mohamed Abdel-Mottaleb, chairman of SabryCorp, told Daily News Egypt. In 2007, the global nanotechnology market was worth \$148 billion; since that time, however, different organizations have arisen that use divergent variables to establish a figure, and as a result, there has been discord in reaching a consensus, noted Abdel-Mottaleb. In either case, Egypt’s slice of that pie is crumb-sized. “For industrial countries, nanotechnology merely represents a matter of lifestyle, while for developing countries, it is a matter of life itself,” he added. Individuals such as Abdel-Mottaleb and Azzazy have set out to ensure that nanotechnology will be used to alleviate some of the ubiquitous, overwhelming problems faced by emerging economies like Egypt, and to eschew being left in the dust by industrialized countries.

Saving time, money and lives Nanotechnology applications are portentous, especially for developing nations, and can be applied to a panoply of industries: from healthcare to sanitation to construction to agriculture — just to name a few. To illustrate, the technology, with which scientists create new materials and products by tinkering around at the molecular level, can be used to improve the cleanliness of buildings facades by making them dirt-resistant — or 40 percent cleaner. The technology can also destroy pollution through the use of a special paint infused with nanomaterials that create a photochemical reaction when the two come into contact. This reaction “disarms” pollution — a highly enticing concept for cities suffering dense air pollution, Abdel-Mottaleb explained. Painting interior walls with nanoinfused paint increases insulation to keep cool air inside, which can reduce energy consumption by 40 percent. This is a particularly salient application in Egypt, which is facing increasing pressure to meet the growing national energy demand. In the world of medicine, nanotechnology will be used for “drug targeting,” which means a nanodrug carrier will be programmed with extreme precision to seek out and destroy infected cells for all types of illnesses, such as HIV, thereby making treatment more effective and efficient. A plastic device currently being developed called “lab on a chip,” costing about \$10, will allow medical staff to detect up to 10,000 different illnesses within minutes from examining one drop of blood. This represents a major boon for developing countries, which face significant challenges regarding the equitable distribution of health services throughout the country. Indeed, it is a hefty economic burden for the poor rural populations to halt work to access treatment in city centers. The technology will be delivered to the person in need, Abdel-Mottaleb said, and provide continuous healthcare. “Instead of a ‘point of sale,’ you have ‘point of

health,” he said. This is particularly crucial for those may have contracted Hepatitis C, a prevalent illness in Egypt, with around 10 million cases. “Many can’t get treatment, and when they do, the diagnosis comes too late,” said Abdel-Mottaleb. But with a targeting system, the diagnosis could be attained in 30 minutes, added Azzazy. In a nutshell, “You save time, money and lives,” Abdel-Mottaleb stated. In a best-case scenario, these applications could be implemented in three to four years if the technology is developed indigenously; if it must be imported, it could take up to 15-20 years, he highlighted. The argument for immediate funds and heightened focus on research is therefore overwhelmingly clear.

Weighing the risks The benefits of the applications are certainly palpable, but the risks mustn’t be discounted. The regulatory framework for nanomaterials in Egypt is currently nonexistent, as both Azzazy and Abdel-Mottaleb said. Yet, they are confident that regulations will be established once the need arises, and to guarantee that Egyptian regulations are up to international norms, they will be based on EU and US standards, which in turn will be adapted to local needs. Concerns have been flagged as regards the impact of free nanoparticles that enter the natural environment — when products containing nanomaterials, for example, begin to decompose in landfills or when humans consume medicinal products containing nanodrug carriers. Abdel-Mottaleb affirmed that this is a grave concern, but the industry has made a serious move to address these issues. He admitted though that, at best, little is known about the technology’s risks. Nonetheless, by 2018 nanomaterials will be prevalent in a myriad of products, according to industry predictions. Abdel-Mottaleb attempted to assuage fears, stating that the Egyptian government and researchers would apply the precautionary principle when creating and introducing new products with nanomaterials into the market.

Unifying local talent In spite of the dire warnings of failing to bridge the nanodivide and concerns over human health and the environment, inroads are, in fact, being made. The Information Technology Industry Development Agency (ITIDA) and IBM teamed up to create Egypt’s first national research lab, launched in 2008, to the tune of LE 300 million in seed money for the first three years, explained Ahmed Tantawy, executive director of the Egyptian Center for Nanotechnology and director of research at IBM. The research lab will focus on creating nanotechnology applications for a range of international and local clients. The aim is have an impact on the national economy versus producing endless reams of research papers, explained Tantawy. Two key areas of research, for instance, include renewable energy solutions, such as solar technology, as well as water desalination in addition to manufacturing applications. Tantawy said the lab would be fully operational by the end of 2011, at which point “serious research work” will begin.

The establishment of the lab signifies a serious stride forward into the nanotechnology realm for Egypt, he said, nevertheless, more money is required. Future funds, however, will be sought from the lab’s growing base of clients rather than from the government. Abdel-Mottaleb and Azzazy believe that if a national plan were established, through coordination and consolidation of Egypt’s talent pool as well as shoring up supplementary funds, the glimmer of hope for the country in nanotechnology would be a tad brighter. Citing Iran as an example, Abdel-Mottaleb explained that in 2003 the country was ranked 134 internationally, but now it has swiftly climbed the ladder to 16 thanks to the country’s national nanotechnology initiative. Thus, as Abdel-Mottaleb

stressed, in a span of six to seven years, Iran has become a major nanotechnology force. As he put it, “They had a critical mass, got organized, and created local knowledge instead of importing it.” Evidence of such a strategy seems to be emerging, as a symbiosis and exchange is occurring between the recently established Nile University nanotechnology program —under Abdel-Mottaleb’s direction, which is the first in the Middle East and Africa — the IBM research center as well as the nanoscience research being conducted at AUC. If these efforts are unsuccessful in helping Egypt get a leg up on the nanotechnology competition, it would both bode poorly for the country’s downtrodden and also represent a missed opportunity for Egypt to contribute to, what Abdel-Mottaleb calls “the renaissance of science.”

Goldman starts coverage of 6 Saudi banks

The Saudi government's stimulus program is likely to result in strong economic growth and robust corporate credit demand, benefiting the country's banking sector, said Goldman Sachs, which started coverage of six banks. Last month, Saudi Arabia announced plans to build schools, hospitals, housing and other infrastructure projects as part of a five-year plan budgeted at nearly \$375 billion. "We believe Saudi banks are entering a virtuous banking cycle, underpinned by credit growth, asset mix improvement, low funding cost and falling loan losses," Goldman said. It started Samba Financial Group, Saudi British Bank, Banque Saudi Fransi and Arab National Bank with "buy" ratings. Corporate loan growth would also rebound on the back of lower government financing, Goldman said, adding that banks with substantial liquidity should benefit the most. Relatively low consumer finance penetration and attractive demographics will result in robust retail loan growth for the banks, Goldman said.

Cyber news:

Google's volunteer-based initiative to boost translation of health info

Google.org recently launched Health Speaks, an initiative which encourages community-based, crowd-sourced translations of health information with the assistance of Google Translator Toolkit. Health Speaks pilot programs for Arabic, Hindi and Swahili began last week and are supported with a donation incentive, awarding local charities with funds based on the number of words volunteers translate. The Health Speaks team has chosen hundreds of what they deemed good quality English-language health articles from Wikipedia for translation. Daily News Egypt sat down with Wael Ghonim, Google’s product and marketing manager for the Middle East and North Africa, who is responsible for leading Google's product strategy in the region and help growing Arabic content online. “We thought of health because [it] is one of those very sensitive topics that require structured content that is professional, high quality [and] trustworthy which people with medical backgrounds have checked,” said Ghonim. “It’s proven that the more health information provided to society, the healthier a society gets, particularly with prevention of specific diseases, health tips and diet information,” he added. According to Google, volunteers who are bilingual in English and either Arabic, Hindi or Swahili are encouraged to translate the articles with the assistance of Google Translator Toolkit, make the content locally relevant, review and publish to the corresponding local language Wikipedia site. For the first 60 days, Google.org will donate 3 cents (US) for each English word translated to the Children's Cancer Hospital 57357, the Public Health

Foundation of India and the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) for the pilots in Arabic, Hindi and Swahili, respectively, up to \$50,000 each. “I think this is a fantastic project for us and I really believe in trying to disseminate information all across the world, so when Google approached us they said we were seen as one of the leaders in the region for healthcare treatment,” said Patricia Pruden, children’s cancer specialist and strategic planning executive at the 57357 hospital. “We are very happy that they wanted to do this, and the idea was that for every word that was translated we get funds adding up to a maximum of \$50,000, which is very important as the hospital is entirely supported by donations,” she added. Google envisions that the initiative will allow community translators to help their friends and neighbors access quality health information in a local language, while also supporting a local non-profit organization working in health or health education. “Language should not be the barrier that denies millions of people worldwide the opportunity to improve their health with valuable information,” said Jennifer Haroon, manager of health initiatives at Google.org. In many parts of the world, information that may help people improve their health is not readily available online in local languages. A 2004 Lancet article described the lack of access to health information as a “major barrier to knowledge-based healthcare in developing countries.” The authors noted that “among currently available technologies, only the internet has the potential to deliver universal access to up-to-date healthcare information.” Speaking about why they chose Wikipedia as their main partner, Ghonim said, “The internet is becoming more and more mainstream and this makes it more critical to have high quality, well-structured professional content on the web and Wikipedia has proven itself as a reliable source for information for many people. “Today, around 2 million people visit Wikipedia per day.” Ghonim added that use of internet in the Arab world is increasing in general, particularly with respect to health topics, but stressed that there is room for improvement. “One of the top Arabic search queries during the H1N1 was for information about H1N1 in Arabic,” he added. “A lot of people today rely on the internet to get information. The moment you here about a disease or epidemic like this people go straight to the internet to search for information.” He also explained that if you look at Wikipedia and compare the amount of available Arabic content to content in German, for example, you will see German content is six or seven times more. Meanwhile, there are 350 million Arabic speakers compared to 27 million German speakers. This means that there is definitely a gap that needs to be filled. Ghonim said that the outcomes of the project will be monitored closely and that Google is expecting expansion by adding more content and eventually reaching out into other fields if this pilot project succeeds. The Health Speaks initiative will also gauge whether volunteers in community-based, crowd-sourced translations is an effective means of getting quality health information translated. For more information, please see visit www.google.org/healthspeaks.

Water issue:

On the Nile, Egypt cuts water use as Ethiopia dams for power

There is a battle over the historic river. Under existing accords, Egypt has veto power over development projects, but upstream nations say they should not be bound by unfair colonial-era pacts. *Nile struggle* Rice farmers in Egypt’s Nile Delta have been ordered to plant on less land — this year’s reduction is more than 900,000 acres — to conserve

water. On the sloping western shores of Lake Tana in central Ethiopia, where villagers gape at new tractors as if they were Ferraris and power lines pass over lean-tos lighted by candles, a poor nation's hopes hum inside a new hydroelectric plant. Lured by the plant's promise of powering villages and irrigating 350,000 acres of farmland, intrepid investors are venturing across misty hills and navigating sprawling savannas. The World Bank has lent the country \$45 million to "unleash" the region's growth potential, and Ethiopian leaders have promised that development along the tributaries feeding the Blue Nile will raise crops for the hungry and bring jobs to a rustic swath of Africa. But not all stories along the Nile are hopeful ones. Follow the great river north as it winds thousands of miles through highlands and deserts and funnels into the canals of Egypt's Nile Delta. Since the days of the pharaohs, the land's fate has been twinned with the Nile, and when other visions and schemes failed, the people of the delta believed that the river, which carried Moses through the reeds and Cleopatra on her lavish exploits, belonged to them. It is in the delta, on some of the most fertile land in the world, that rice farmers have been ordered to plant fewer acres to conserve water as Ethiopia and other nations threaten to siphon away millions of gallons before the river reaches Egypt. "We're victims of something much larger than ourselves," said Khaled Abubakr, a rice farmer whose income may drop by nearly half this year because of the new limits. "The government sends delegations to tell us how precious every drop of Nile water is to Egypt." There is a battle over the river that for millenniums has flowed through the rise and fall of civilizations. The dispute stems from a 1929 treaty brokered by the British and a 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan that guaranteed Egypt the majority of the river's water. The treaties were political, yet they underscored Egypt's reliance on the Nile: The river's source countries, such as Ethiopia, have rainy seasons and other water supplies, but without the river Egypt's farmlands shrivel into desert and die. Under the agreements, Egypt has veto power over Nile-related development projects and is entitled to 55.5 billion cubic meters of river water a year, or about two-thirds of the Nile's flow. But upstream nations say they should not be bound by unfair colonial-era pacts. In May, five of the 10 Nile basin countries — Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya — signed a deal that next year would give them larger shares of water for farming, electricity and development. Angry Egyptian officials said that their nation's security was at stake. They have since toned down their threatening rhetoric and are seeking compromise on how to balance protecting Egypt's share against new development. The aim of the upstream countries, however, is to draft a new legal framework to satisfy their national interests and weaken Egypt's "historic rights" to the river. "Egypt deals with the Nile water issue as a life-and-death matter," said Moufid Shehab, Egypt's minister of state for legal and parliamentary affairs. "The River Nile provides Egypt with 95% of the country's water needs." The 4,160-mile-long Nile is formed by the White Nile, which originates near Lake Victoria in Uganda, and the Blue Nile, which begins at Lake Tana in Ethiopia. They converge in Sudan and flow north through the length of Egypt before spilling into the Mediterranean Sea. The river winds through poverty and turmoil and is vital for economic growth to sustain rising populations. It is a lesson in how water can dictate a nation's future, and threaten or preserve regional stability. "The way forward," Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told Al Jazeera satellite TV channel, "is not for Egypt to try and stop the unstoppable." Ethiopia's new Tana-Beles hydroelectric plant on the banks of Lake Tana was built without Egypt's approval. But Meles has insisted that

his country, where blackouts are common and half the children younger than 5 are malnourished, will build whatever it pleases along the river and tributaries. His government has enticed investors to the newly irrigated farmland with dirt-cheap leases. That's what drew Addis Belay, a wealthy businessman from the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, who leased 1,060 acres irrigated by the Tana-Beles project. This spring he planted his first crop of rice, sesame seeds, soy and corn, food he hopes one day to export to neighboring Sudan. Belay's stone-crushing factory in Addis Ababa is also profiting from cheaper electricity generated by the new \$520-million hydroelectric plant. Belay's sister-in-law, Liyou Feleke, said Egypt has profited from the Nile while Ethiopia has languished in poverty. In 2008 the per capita gross national income in Egypt was \$1,800, according to the World Bank. In Ethiopia it was just \$280. "The Egyptians have been using it for generations," she said. "The Ethiopians, we have never used a bit. But it's time." In recent years, Chinese contractors have threaded skeins of power lines across the Nile Basin to carry electricity from the Tana-Beles plant to distant cities such as Addis Ababa and to nearby Bahir Dar. More than 80% of Ethiopians live without modern electricity, according to the World Bank. Zegeye Alemye, a barber in Blue Nile Village about two hours drive from Tana-Beles, was adamant that the river be developed. "This country should benefit from the Nile," he said. Zegeye lives on the banks of the Abay River, the largest Blue Nile tributary. More than 50 years ago, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie built one of the nation's first hydropower plants on the river, not far from Zegeye's tiny tin-roofed shop. Another hydropower plant was built downstream in the 1980s. Electricity transformed the village from a few hundred people into a town of 7,000. Zegeye gestured toward an electrical socket, where a cellphone and his hair clippers were charging. "My life is based on this," he said. The Nile hooks south from Lake Tana and then surges north. It crosses borders, slips past Cairo and flows into the delta, which from the sky resembles an open, green hand reaching through the desert across northern Egypt toward the sea. Women and children bend with egrets in the fields and roads are crowded with tractors pulling the corn harvest. Most of the water that streams clear and white from irrigation hoses and runs through the furrows began its flow in Ethiopia. Abubakr, the rice farmer, sat in the shade between a mosque and a storage shed stacked with bags of rice husks. The government told delta farmers that Egypt must bolster its water reserves in case a compromise is not negotiated between the Nile basin countries. Egypt's rice crop, which needs more water than any other, will be cut this year by more than 900,000 acres. Abubakr's April rice planting shrank from seven acres to three, and he'll lose about \$4,500 at the October harvest. "We produce good rice and it brings the highest prices at home and on the export market," he said. "Now we have to give it up by growing more beans and corn." Those crops, said Abubakr's friend, Mosaad Salem, pay one-half to one-third of a rice yield. "We've left some fields abandoned," he said. "The cost of planting and harvesting corn is just not worth it. My parents were farmers and my grandparents were farmers. This is all we know how to do. We've had crises before, but not like this one." Field hands strolled in and washed for prayers. Abubakr reached down and picked up a rice husk, dry and cracked. It blew out of his palm. The husks are sold to cement factories and ground into food for livestock. Little goes to waste in the delta. A woman brought sodas and the men stayed in the shade, discussing tumbling prices, with no pretension that they understood the politics and conflicts along the Nile between its headwaters and its mouth to the sea.

Egypt protects water stations from Nile oil spill

Authorities have blocked off water purification stations along the Nile in southern Egypt to prevent some 100 tons of diesel oil that leaked from a barge from polluting drinking water, officials said Sunday. The vessel was docked in Aswan, some 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) south of Cairo, when low water levels caused it to tilt, partially submerge and leak 110 tons of diesel fuel into the Nile on Saturday. Aswan Governor Mustafa al-Sayed told the MENA news agency that sites along the Nile that feed river water to purification stations have been blocked off as a precautionary measure to prevent polluted water from entering filters. Egypt gets much of its drinking water from the Nile. Luxor Governor Samir Farag said the small slick fragmented as it passed through an area of dense grass. Farag said samples of water would be tested regularly as the spill approached Luxor, which is down river from Aswan. A senior Luxor official, Hussein Ali, said the slick is 60 yards (meters) wide and 1.2 miles (2 kilometers) long, but is shrinking and is not expected to affect water supply stations. Earlier Saturday, the barge's captain, Yasser Hussein, told police that a drop in water levels caused his vessel to tilt and submerge, allowing the diesel fuel to leak into the river, a security official said. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, said the barge was unloaded to refloat it.

Egypt: Barge leaks 100 tons of gasoline into Nile

A barge has leaked some 100 tons of gasoline into the Nile River in southern Egypt after it became partially submerged while workers unloaded its cargo. The vessel docked Saturday in Aswan, about 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) south of Cairo, when part of the barge sank below the surface and began spewing gasoline into the river. The leak has since been stopped. Officials in three southern Egyptian provinces have declared a state of emergency to contain the spill and to prevent it from spreading down river. The barge belongs to the Nile Company for River Transport. Officials say it was carrying 244 tons of gasoline. The chief of the Luxor drinking water company urged people to stockpile water in case the spill reaches the city's water purification facilities.

Nile barge sinks in Egypt, causing a 100-ton diesel spill

A river barge sank on the Nile in Egypt's south on Saturday, causing a diesel spill that threatened drinking water in the area, the official MENA news agency reported. Almost half of the 240 tons of fuel that was being transported by the vessel, owned by the Nile Company for River Transportation, leaked into the river at the city of Aswan, nearly 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) south of Cairo. "All measures are being taken to clean up the leakage and ensure that drinking water supplies are safe," MENA quoted Aswan governor Mustafa Al-Sayyed as saying. The driver of the barge, Yasser Hussein, was later arrested, MENA reported, adding he had told police low water levels caused the vessel to tilt and in turn the diesel to leak. The vessel was docked in Aswan when part of the barge sank below the surface and began spewing gasoline into the river Saturday. The leak has since been stopped. Officials in three southern Egyptian provinces have declared a state of emergency to contain the spill and to prevent it from spreading down river. Mohamed Mustafa, a top provincial official, said water supplies had been temporarily shut off for testing, but results proved drinking water in the region of Aswan was safe.

Mustafa said the spill would not have an impact on Nile river life. "It's not a big spill. There are small spots of oil and, considering the size of the Nile, it will not affect the river environment," Mustafa told MENA. The chief of the Luxor drinking water company urged people to stockpile water in case the spill reaches the city's water purification facilities. Residents in Aswan reported being told to prepare for a three-day water cut. In June, an oil spill off the Egyptian Red Sea coast of Hurghada threatened to damage marine life in the area. –Additional reporting by Daily News Egypt.

Social front

Court orders mental test for TV anchor

The Giza Criminal Court Monday ordered a mental check-up to Ihab Salah, an anchorman on official Egyptian television, accused of shooting his wife to death and possessing drugs. The court also decided to postpone the hearings of this high-profile case to November 8. Last July, Salah killed his wife, Magda Kamal, after a heated argument in their house in the Pyramids area, south of Cairo. Salah, 45, told investigators that he argued with Magda and shot her in the head with a handgun he had inherited from his father, a retired police general. "She bled and fell to the ground. I called the emergency police and the first aid to save her. But, they came 45 minutes late," Salah said. He has pleaded not guilty to the charge of premeditated murder. Salah said that he did not intend to kill his wife "I just had acted on the spur of the moment because Magda insulted me and said very bad words about my mother and sister," Salah told the investigators.

Ahram editor defends doctored photo of Mubarak

State-run daily Al-Ahram defended in an editorial Friday publishing a doctored photo of the Mideast peace talks, which put President Hosni Mubarak in the front, saying it was "illustrative." Last Tuesday, ahead of the second round the peace talks in Sharm El-Sheikh, the paper published doctored photo from the Washington talks earlier in the month. The original photo showed US President Barack Obama flanked two steps behind by the head of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who were, in turn followed by President Mubarak on the left and King Abdullah on the right. The doctored photo, published by the state-run paper, showed Mubarak leading the pack. Al-Ahram chief-editor Osama Saraya wrote in an editorial Friday that altering the image wasn't meant to distort the truth but to illustrate the leading political role of Egypt's president. Explaining that the photo was published in its original format earlier in the month, Saraya stressed that the paper doesn't lie or alter the truth. He accused his critics of violating the ethics of the profession by the pointing the change in the photo. "The published photo is illustrative; so those who don't understand could," he wrote, saying the critics shouldn't mislead others by "claiming to have uncovered a hoax. ... They are the ones who mislead, who lie, and who believe themselves, then accuse us."

Professors wearing niqab banned from giving lectures

Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Hani Helal supported a number of universities' decision to ban faculty members wearing the niqab, or the full face veil, from giving lectures. "The faculty member who is wearing the niqab should sit at home

or in her office communicating with her students through the telephone or videoconference,” said Helal during a visit to Cairo University and Ain Shams University on Saturday, stated official news portal, Egynews. He explained that interaction between the teacher and students during the learning process is essential, a component he says will be diminished if the professor is wearing niqab. Helal also pointed out that security guards at universities are working to protect the campus and only follow the administration’s instructions. Last year, the allowing female students wearing the niqab were banned from entering university premises. In a meeting with university students at the Qir Youth Camp last July, Helal affirmed that no female wearing the niqab will be allowed on campus this academic year. Although he respects the niqab as an expression of personal freedom, he said this freedom ends when it violates the freedom of others. “Every female student has the right to wear the niqab outside the university campus but will not be allowed to do so on campus,” Helal said. Although there has not been an official ministerial decree to this effect, the minister’s decision reflects an ongoing debate over allowing niqab-wearing students on campus, in university dormitories and even in exams halls. Last January, an Egyptian court upheld the ban on the full face veil in schools affiliated with the Islamic Al-Azhar University. In June, 200 students wearing the niqab were prevented from sitting the spring semester final exams when the presidents of Ain Shams, Cairo and Helwan Universities refused to allow them entry. The Administrative Court at the State Council supported the decision of the three universities to deny these students entry, saying that the decision was consistent with the rules and regulations of the universities in addition to the fact that it is an issue of public welfare. Human rights activists were up in arms following the decision, with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) condemning the decision. “University administrations had a large number of options they could have applied in order to meet security and discipline requirements inside examination rooms,” EIPR director Hossam Bahgat said in the statement. “They chose instead to resort to the most extreme measure, a measure which cannot be separated from a series of measures which plainly seeks to punish students wearing the niqab for their views and beliefs,” Bahgat continued. A few days ago, a cleric at Al-Azhar Mosque told AFP that he applauded France's ban on the face veil worn by some devout Muslim women, saying the niqab harmed Islam's image. Abdel Muti Al-Bayyumi, a member of an influential council of clerics at Al-Azhar, said the niqab “has no basis in Islamic law and there is nothing in the Quran or Sunna that supports it.”

Rights group: Egyptian activist seized by security

An Egyptian human rights group said on Friday an activist had been abducted by members of the security forces in plain clothes but that he had been freed later. In a statement, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) said Amr Salah was seized outside his home on Thursday, citing an eyewitness saying he was beaten by four men in civilian clothes who put him into a vehicle with darkened windows. The men identified themselves to the eyewitness as members of Egypt's security services, the statement said. Ragab Saad Taha, a program officer at CIHRS, later told Al-Masry Al-Youm that Salah had contacted his mother by telephone on Friday to say he was released and that he was heading to his home in the coastal city of Alexandria. Interior Ministry

officials could not immediately be reached for comment. "The incident is especially worrying because other Egyptian activists have been forcibly disappeared in the past under similar circumstances," the group said in its statement, adding that Salah was a rights activist and researcher. Taha said that the abducted activist had previously participated in the pro-ElBaradei's campaign to press for political reforms in Egypt. Two policemen went on trial in July charged with the illegal arrest and torture of anti-corruption activist Khaled Said who died in their custody, a case that has provoked protests at home and abroad. That case has become a rallying point for Egyptians who say security forces act with impunity under an emergency law allowing indefinite detention and curbs on anti-government activity. The government says the emergency law is aimed at dealing with drug and terrorism cases.

Muslim Brotherhood pokes social networking with Ikhwanbook

In another move to further expand their outreach to the public, Egypt's biggest opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, created a social networking website, Ikhwanbook, equivalent to the popular Facebook. The aim of IkhwanBook is to "share your life with other Muslim brothers around the world," as stated on the group's official website, adding that the site wants to promote the concept of moderate Islam and to provide a forum for free discussions. This is not the first time the Muslim Brotherhood has created its own version of internationally recognized website. Websites such as IkhwanWiki, IkhwanGoogle and Ikhwantube are among its creations. However, Ikhwanbook is concerned with concepts such as privacy, security and decency, which have often come into question on Facebook, which has attracted more than 400 million users worldwide. In relation to decency, Muslim Brotherhood members said they are against groups and discussions that are offensive to Islam, citing the group created calling to mark May 20 as "Draw Mohammed Day" eliciting caricatures of the Muslim Prophet, which has attracted 81,306 fans. For Muslim Brotherhood MP Abdel Fattah Hassan, also a member of the PA's culture committee, creating the social networking website is part of "taking action" against those who attack Islam. "What has been evident is that the [West] is ignorant of Islam therefore we need reach out to them and teach them that Islam is a religion of tolerance and mercy and show the proper behavior of a Muslim so that they would be informed about the religion, and this is simply one forum for this and its building on an already successful medium," he explained. "I think that it's important that we have channels which are not contradictory to the original Facebook but which are parallel to it," Ahmed Said, an engineer and a member of the Brotherhood's media development team, said in a press statement. "We will not be isolated. Many groups have their own social network on the net. The name is Ikhwan, but it is not limited to Ikhwan. It is open to everyone," he added. Just like Facebook, Ikhwanbook members create profiles which they can customize by uploading pictures, list their interests and hobbies, etc. Following in Facebook's steps, members can also upload photos and videos and post blogs. Furthermore, they can create groups, events, polls and make announcements. 'Featured Members' who are the most popular members of Ikhwanbook, whom you can find through the Friend Finder option, come from an interesting variety of countries including Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Oman and Morocco. The most popular groups on Ikhwanbook discuss social topics such as "Reviving the Arabic Language" and "Muslims in Chechnya" – which discusses life in Chechnya, its traditions

and culture. Once you log on to the website, a banner pops up telling you to “Support Change” and sign the petition by the National Association for Change.

But who is attracted to Ikhwanbook? Ahmed Osman, a 30-year-old from Sudan, has been a member of Ikhwanbook for almost one month now and is active on the website, usually chatting with other members. “I just saw that there are a lot of enemies who hate Islam, and actually every non-Muslim almost became a potential enemy, so I want to know how Muslims think and whether this problem comes from the way Muslims think or it is the west media,” he said. “No one can deny that Islam is targeted right now but does this problem lie in Islam? Of course not. It is in our perception and understanding of Islam or just a campaign by the West, and so I’ve joined Ikhwanbook to find out,” said Osman, who is not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but, as he puts it, “someone who is very protective of Islam.” Osman pointed out that he is not concerned with matters related to security as he is not offending anyone. While Osman was attracted to the website even though he is not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, other internet users might not necessarily follow suit. “Why should I join a social network associated with [the Muslim Brotherhood] when I don’t conform with their ideology and the ideas they are promoting,” said a 23-year-old banker who preferred to remain anonymous. “Learning about them is one thing I’m keen on but joining Ikhwanbook will be following them which is something I don’t want to do,” he added.

Iraq

Political front

Iraq To Pay For U.S. Abuse Claims Against Saddam Regime

Iraq has signed a deal with the United States to settle claims from U.S. nationals who say they were mistreated by Saddam Hussein's regime during the 1990-91 Gulf war. In 1990, scores of Americans were captured by Iraq in 1990 and used as human shields to deter allied air strikes, and some say they were tortured. Iraq's Foreign Ministry said the deal -- reportedly around \$400 million --- will help end sanctions imposed by the United Nations two decades ago after Saddam invaded Kuwait.

Iraq to settle Saddam-era US claims

Baghdad to pay compensation to US citizens who say they were abused by former Iraqi regime in run-up to 1990 Gulf War. Iraq has agreed to pay compensation to US citizens who say they were tortured or traumatised by the regime of Saddam Hussein, the late Iraqi leader. The money would be given to Americans who were affected by the Iraqi invasion of neighbouring Kuwait in 1990, a senior Iraqi government official was cited as saying by the Associated Press news agency on Saturday. "This agreement is related to the invasion of Kuwait during the former regime time. Saddam detained US citizens as human shields, and he did torture," the official, who did not want to be named, said. The official said that Baghdad had agreed to pay about \$400m to the claimants. The agreement, signed by US and Iraqi officials, ends years of legal battles and could help Iraq emerge from United Nations sanctions put in place two decades ago. Baghdad would need the help of the Washington to remove the sanctions, and the settlement may remove what has been a stumbling block between the two sides.

Human shields Saddam's government held hundreds of US citizens hostage during the run-up to the Gulf War, using them as human shields in hopes of staving off an attack by the US and its allies. David Ranz, a spokesman for the US embassy in Iraq, said the agreement was signed on September 2 but that Iraq still has to go through several steps for the agreement to be finalised. Generally such agreements have to be approved by Iraq's cabinet. Ranz did not say who the specific claimants are or the financial amounts involved. Many of the Americans pursued lawsuits for years against Saddam's government, keeping up their legal fight after Saddam was overthrown in 2003 and a new government came to power. The claimants include Bob Simon, a correspondent of US broadcaster CBS News, who was held for more than a month during the Gulf War. The deal, which was first reported by the Christian Science Monitor, is likely to anger many Iraqis who consider themselves the victims' of both Saddam and the 2003 US invasion, and wonder why they should pay money for wrongs committed by the ousted leader.

Geo strategic front

Economic front

Iraqi Kurds refuse to cooperate with Oil Ministry on oil exports

Iraqi Kurds have not delivered on promises to ship 100,000 barrels of oil a day to the outside world through Iraqi national pipeline network, the Oil Ministry said. The ministry's spokesman, Assem Jihad, said the sides had reached an agreement under which the Kurds would have pumped the volume for exports. "The Ministry of Natural Resources in the (Kurdish) region has exhibited no sign of cooperation so far. It has not supplied us with 100,000 barrels we had agreed to be exported to the outside world," Jihad said. The agreement was that the proceeds from oil exports originating in the Kurdish region would go to central government coffers. But the Kurds also wanted the central government to cover the investments they have made to extract oil from fields in their areas. Several foreign firms have been developing oil fields in the Kurdish autonomous region comprising three provinces – Kirkuk, Sulaimaniya and Arbil. The Oil Ministry says many of these deals are illegal and it cannot pay for them since they were signed without central government approval.

Iraq's Kirkuk oil output reaches 750,000 barrels a day

Production from Iraq's major oil center of Kirkuk has reached 750,000 barrels a day, a success story in a country still trying to form a government six months after general elections. The high production rate, according to an Oil Ministry source, has helped the country double exports from Kirkuk via Turkey. The source said Iraq's exports from northern fields were now in the range of 600,000 barrels from 300,00 to 350,000 previously. The current output rate from Kirkuk has been possible due to large investments in developing producing fields such as Bai Hassan, Jambour and Ujail. However, the current production rate is still 50,000 barrels short of what Kirkuk used to produce in the months prior to the 2003-U.S. invasion. The shipping of 600,000 barrels a day to Turkey is certain to increase Iraqi oil royalties. It also tells of relative quiet in the once restive areas through which the pipelines pass. The Turkey-bound pipelines were scenes of repeated attacks.

Social front

Three day of mourning declared in Fallujah

The Iraqi city of Fallujah has declared three-day long mourning after a joint U.S.-Iraqi attack on the city killed at least 10 civilians and injured many others. The raid on Wednesday has raised tensions and angered the city's inhabitants as well as the nearly two million Muslim Sunnis who live in the Province of Anbar, west of Baghdad. The Muslim Scholars Association, a group of powerful Muslim Sunni clerics in Iraq, described the raid as "a massacre in which two children were killed." U.S. and Iraqi officials claim that the raid killed a former Iraqi officer linked to al-Qaeda group in the country. But the claim could not be substantiated and eyewitnesses and officials in the city said all the dead and injured were civilians. Schools, offices and shops were closed in Fallujah on Thursday in protest against the attack was also strongly condemned by provincial officials of Anbar of which the city of Ramadi is the capital. The Province of Anbar was the major stronghold of resistance and defied repeated U.S. onslaughts to bring it under control. U.S. troops only managed to establish relative quiet following the recruitment of Sunni tribesmen in their fight against al-Qaeda. The officials in Anbar have asked Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for an independent investigation of the raid, according to Mohammed Fathi, the governor's advisor. "The Governor Qassem al-Fahdawi has been in touch with Maliki who has agreed to set a commission to investigate the incident" Fathi said.

"All the casualties were civilians including the owner of the house the troops targeted," Fathi said.

One hundred guards for 1,200 archaeological sites in southern Iraqi province

Smuggling and illegal digging of ancient Mesopotamian sites is going on uninterrupted in the southern Iraqi Province of Dhi Qar, Iraq's richest in archaeological treasures, according to the provincial antiquities chief. Archaeologist Amer Abdulrazzaq says he is given the task of looking after 1,200 archaeologically significant sites in the province and he only has 100 guards. The province of which the city of Nasiriyah is the capital is home to Ur, whose magnificent remains and debris used to tell the story of one of the world's best known ancient nations, the Sumerians, who invented writing and the world's first system of civil government. In Dhi Qar are two of the best preserved Mesopotamian ziqqurats (terraced temples) in the world. But Abdulrazzaq says illegal diggers and smugglers have done much harm to the archaeology of the province. U.S. occupation troops had camped for years in Ur and turned its debris into military barracks. Abdulrazzaq says with the 2003-U.S. invasion, the country lost control not only of the treasures in its museums but also of thousands of ancient sites. In the years since then, smuggling gangs and illegal digging teams have become much more sophisticated and hard to pin down, he says. According to some estimates there are more Mesopotamian artifacts unaccounted for than the volume of treasures in Iraq Museum, one of the world's richest. The spot market in Mesopotamian pieces is growing in Iraq and smuggled or illegally dug artifacts are often openly displayed in shops.

Iraq: a country of orphans

One in every six Iraqis is an orphan. That is the toll Iraqi children are paying in a country which is supposedly under the occupation and protection of the world's only superpower.

Not all the orphans are the result of the violence that swept the country in the aftermath of the 2003-U.S. invasion. But the invasion has caused untold miseries for Iraqis, surpassing those inflicted on them by their former tormentors, the clique that ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein. There were unconfirmed reports that Iraq has turned into a country of orphans. But the exact figure only became a reality recently, when the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs made public its own statistics. The statistics points to dangerous demographics with grave social, health and economic consequences for a country which still lacks basic infrastructure. These are the voiceless Iraqis. Their U.S. occupiers have almost cut and run and their Iraqi rulers are not so much concerned about their livelihood and well-being. In a violent country like Iraq, where U.S. marines with bullet-proof jackets and thick armor, cannot feel safe, there is not so much room for an orphan. Hundreds of thousands of them live on the street. There is no social security system to look after them. As for who killed their parents, that is a totally different question. They could be victims of random or deliberate fire and shelling by U.S. marines, their security guards or the multifarious militia groups which the U.S. helped prosper and mushroom. If we consider the numbers of Iraqi orphans in terms of U.S. population of 308 million, the five million Iraqi orphans would be the equivalent of nearly 50 million U.S. orphans. Imagine major U.S. cities such as New York, L.A., Chicago, Houston, Phoenix and Philadelphia all populated completely by orphans. There are so many stories in Iraq which its occupiers and rulers, and unfortunately the international media, would like to keep under wraps. But to give lip service to this massive number of orphans, more than 16 percent of Iraqi population, and nearly half its children, is really devastating to hear.

Rights Group Says Torture, Abuses Routine In Iraqi Prisons

According to Amnesty International, many prisoners are held in Iraq 'without charge or trial,' and confessions are often extracted by torture. According to Amnesty International, many prisoners are held in Iraq "without charge or trial," and confessions are often extracted by torture. Amnesty International says tens of thousands of detainees are being held in Iraqi prisons without trial -- and that many are facing physical and psychological abuse or other mistreatment. The London-based human rights watchdog issued a 59-page report today that lists several men the group says were subjected to torture or died in Iraqi prison. The report is titled "New Order, Same Abuses: Unlawful Detentions And Torture In Iraq." Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa program director, says that Iraqi authorities have failed to take effective action to stop torture and punish the perpetrators of torture, despite overwhelming evidence that torture is being used. "Our main concerns are the great number of detainees who are held without charge or trial, the length or period that some of them have been held," Smart says. "And the fact that their number has swelled in recent months with the handover by the U.S. forces of detainees they were holding into Iraq security custody when Iraqi security forces have a very bad record of torture and ill-treatment of detainees." He adds that Amnesty is calling attention to the situation and to the need to address it, "and, really, restore the rule of law in Iraq."

Secret Torture Prisons Among the individuals listed in the Amnesty International report are Riad Muhammad Salih al-Oqaibi. He was arrested in September 2009 and held in a detention facility in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone before being transferred to a

secret detention facility in the capital. Amnesty International says Oqaibi was beaten so hard on the chest during interrogation by Iraqi authorities that his ribs were broken and his liver damaged. It says Oqaibi died in mid-February as a result of internal bleeding caused by those beatings. Smart says Oqaibi's treatment does not appear to have been an isolated case, as detainees "are being taken off often to secret detention centers. A number of these have been discovered and uncovered." He notes that those detained in such centers "have routinely been tortured or ill-treated -- by being suspended by the arms or the ankles for long periods, by being beaten, clubbed, hit with hoses [or] pipes, and, in some cases, with electric shocks [or] being threatened with rape."

Beating Out Confessions Smart says Iraqi prison authorities in many cases appear to be using torture to extract confessions from detainees, "which could then be taken before the courts, if they are prosecuted, as the evidence against them." In some cases, he adds, "it does seem that people have been forced to confess. They claim the confessions were false and they've confessed to crimes that carry the death penalty. In some cases, they've been sentenced to death and in some cases, we believe, [they've been] executed." Amnesty International says security forces in the autonomous region of Kurdistan also are at fault. The group's report notes one case in which a detainee has been held for more than 10 years without charge or trial and was allegedly tortured by the Kurdish security police. Another international rights watchdog, Human Rights Watch, issued a similar report in April alleging that Iraqi men were raped, electrocuted, and beaten in a "secret prison" in Baghdad. In mid-2009, Iraq's parliament called for an independent inquiry into prison abuse.

Violence Fills A Vacuum Baghdad took over full responsibility for prisons in the country in July, with the United States only responsible for a small section of high-value detainees in Karkh Prison near Baghdad. But Iraq's penal system is fractured --- with the Justice, Interior, and Defense ministries all running their own detention facilities. Smart says that a political deadlock that has prevented the formation of a new Iraqi government is also contributing to a situation in which torture and mistreatment of detainees is not uncommon. "There's a political vacuum in Iraq with uncertainty as to the future. Armed groups opposed to the government have been exploiting that. There's been a further rise in attacks and deaths of civilians, Smart says. This "factionalism," Smart says, is "also affecting the way that people get detained, who is detained, where they are detained, who has authority over them -- and we're not seeing a commitment, political will on the part of the government, to reestablish the rule of law, to hold the security forces accountable, to deal with torture and, indeed, to give justice using the standards of 'fair trial' to the victims of human rights violations." Although Amnesty International is trying to catalog all the cases it can in which people are being held without charge in Iraqi jails, Smart says it's difficult to get any clear picture from Iraqi security forces about detainees in Iraq. But he says Amnesty estimates there are about 30,000 Iraqi detainees who have not been charged with any crime or faced a trial.

Iraq ministry enters 'secret jail'

Human rights group urges action after allegations of abuse at Baghdad prison. The Iraqi ministry of human rights has said two of its inspection teams have entered a facility, described as a "secret prison" by a Los Angeles Times newspaper report. Kamil Amin, a spokesman for the ministry, told Al Jazeera on Tuesday that serious legal violations had

been committed at the jail in the capital, Baghdad. "Our teams have received complains that the prisoners are not getting enough legal consultation and suffer from very slow procedures that take much longer than they should," Amin said. However, he refused to answer questions about whether there was any evidence of torture on the inmates at the facility at the former al-Muthanna air base in west Baghdad. The Los Angeles Times reported Iraqi officials as saying that more than 100 prisoners had been tortured with electric shocks, suffocated with plastic bags or beaten.

'Human rights abuses' UK-based human rights group Amnesty International urged Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, to investigate the allegations of abuses against the predominantly Sunni detainees. "We found judges and representatives of the public prosecutor installed inside the prison, which means the prison is not a secret one" Kamil Amin, spokesman for Iraq's human rights ministry "The existence of secret jails indicates that military units in Iraq are allowed to commit human rights abuses unchecked," Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa deputy director, said in a statement on Monday. Maliki, who is looking to build a parliamentary majority following elections last month, has denied any knowledge of the prison, but Amnesty said that this did not absolve the government of responsibility. "Prime Minister Maliki's claim that he was unaware of abuses cannot exonerate the authorities from their responsibilities and their duty to ensure the safety of detainees," Sahraoui said. "Maliki's government has repeatedly pledged to investigate incidents of torture and other serious human rights abuses by the Iraqi security forces, but no outcome of such investigations has ever been made public."

Prison 'not secret' Amin rejected the description of the facility, by the Los Angeles Times and Amnesty, as a "secret prison". "We found judges and representatives of the public prosecutor installed inside the prison, which means the prison is not a secret one," he said. Amin said his ministry had collected enough evidence to prove that the prisoners, who were detained during an operation in October targeting alleged Sunni fighters in Nineveh province, were transferred from Nineveh to Baghdad legally. But Atheel al-Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh, contested Amin's claims. "The prisoners were transferred without court or investigation judge orders," he said. Al-Nujaifi accused the security forces of targeting civilians in his province. The whereabouts of the detainees came to light in March after relatives of the missing men raised their concerns with Iraq's human rights ministry.

Israel Palestine

Geo strategic front

Peace talks

Obama calls for settlement freeze

US president says moratorium on Israeli settlement construction should be extended beyond September 26 expiry date. Barack Obama, the US president, has called for Israel to extend its partial freeze of the building of settlements on occupied Palestinian land to inject fresh momentum into newly-resumed Middle East peace talks. Speaking on Friday, Obama said that last week's launch of a new round of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians had "exceeded many people's expectations". But the president warned that the approaching expiry of a moratorium on Israeli construction of projects on Palestinian territory, which is due to end on September 26, could threaten the negotiations. "A major

bone of contention during the course of this month is going to be the potential lapse of the settlement moratorium," Obama told a White House news conference. He said that he had told Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, that "given so far the talks are moving forward in a constructive way, it makes sense to extend the moratorium".Obama also said he had spoken to Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, and told him to "show the Israeli public that you are serious, and constructive in these talks so that the politics for prime minister Netanyahu, if he were to extend the settlement moratorium, would be a little bit easier".Al Jazeera's Anand Naidoo, reporting from Washington, said that without the extension the talks could collapse. "Palestinians have made it clear that they will walk away from these talks if the moratorium is lifted and settlement-building resumes, and that would be end of yet another attempt to achieve peace in the Middle East," he said. The second round of talks, which were launched at the beginning of the month in Washington after being broken off when Israel attacked the Gaza Strip in 2008, are due to talk place in Egypt and Israel next week. Those attending will include Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state.

Optimistic tone Acknowledging that difficulties lay ahead, Obama struck a cautiously optimistic tone in Friday's news conference. "I remain hopeful but this is going to be tough," Obama said, adding that Netanyahu and Abbas had come to the White House talks "with a sense of purpose and seriousness and cordiality that frankly exceeded lots of people's expectations".However, he acknowledged that "there are enormous hurdles between now and our end point, and they're going to be a whole bunch of folks in the region who want to undermine these negotiations".Both Israeli and Palestinian factions have cast doubt on the success of the talks. Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli foreign minister, has said that he does not expect peace talks to bear fruit and has ruled out any extension to the settlement freeze. Meanwhile, Hamas, who hold power in the Gaza Strip and are also opposed to the talks, launched two attacks against settlers in the West Bank last week, killing four Israelis and wounding two others. Obama said that he understood it was a "risk for us to promote" the new talks, but said "it's a risk worth taking because the alternative is a status quo that is unsustainable". "If these talks break down, we're going to keep on trying," Obama said, adding that a peace deal in the Middle East would have long-term benefits for US interests in the region. "It would help us deal with terrorist organisations in the region," he said. "We're not just doing this to feel good. We're doing it because it will help secure America as well."

Exchange of fire over Gaza border

A rocket fired from the the Gaza Strip has exploded in Israel after the Israeli military launched air raids against Hamas targets in the Palestinian territory, witnesses and officials have said. No injuries or damage were reported after the Qassam rocket landed in the southern Shaar Hanegev area on Friday morning. Hamas officials said five Palestinians were wounded in the Israeli raids late on Thursday, targeting a Hamas security compound in Gaza city. A smuggling tunnel along Gaza's border with Egypt was also bombed by Israeli aircraft. The Israeli military confirmed the raids, saying they came in response to a rocket and a mortar bomb fired from Gaza into Israel. At least six rockets or mortar rounds have been fired from Gaza into Israel since Monday. Two Palestinians were killed when Israeli air raids targeted smuggling tunnels last Saturday. The Hamas movement, which runs the de facto government Gaza, has vowed to carry out attacks

against Israeli targets in the coming weeks in an effort to undermine talks between Israel and the Palestinian that the group has described as "useless".

Israel to end settlement moratorium

Israeli PM says current restrictions on building in West Bank to end, but indicates possible limits on future building. The Palestinian president has threatened to quit talks if Israel did not renew housing restrictions Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has said the current restrictions on the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank will not remain in place, though there will be some limits on future construction. Israel's 10-month freeze on new settlements construction in West Bank expires at the end of this month and is a key point of contention in newly launched peace talks with the Palestinians. "The Palestinians demand that after September 26, there will be zero building [in the West Bank] will not happen," Netanyahu told Tony Blair, envoy of the Quartet of Middle East peace mediators, on Sunday. He said Israel would not build "tens of thousands of housing units that are in the pipeline, but we will not freeze the lives of the residents." The prime minister did not provide details or timelines, but his statement means the ban on new housing starts would be at least partially lifted. Netanyahu is to meet with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, on Tuesday for their first meeting since peace talks resumed at the White House earlier this month.

Conditions for talks Netanyahu imposed the settlement slowdown in the West Bank to promote the resumption of peace talks. But several thousand housing units already being built were allowed to continue, and the measure does not apply to Jewish neighbourhoods in east Jerusalem. Abbas has threatened repeatedly to quit the talks if Israel does not renew the restrictions. Palestinians repeated their threats to leave the talks after Netanyahu's announcement. "Our position is very clear," Husam Zomlot, a Palestinian spokesman, said. "Should the settlement construction and expansion continue, we are out." Netanyahu also told Blair the Palestinians must recognise Israel as a Jewish state, but the Palestinians speak only of two states. Speaking at the weekly meeting of his Cabinet earlier on Sunday, Netanyahu said that Israel recognises the principle of two states for two peoples, the Israelis and the Palestinians, but the Palestinians speak only of two states. "I hear them saying 'two states' but I do not hear them recognising two states for two peoples," he said. Palestinian leaders have refused to recognise Israel as the state of the Jewish people because some 20 per cent of its citizens are Arabs, and the Palestinians claim the right of refugees and their descendants to return to their homes in Israel.

Clinton: Time is ripe for peace

Clinton says both Israeli and Palestinian leaders "recognise time is not on either of their sides." [AFP] US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has urged both Israel and the Palestinians to find ways to clear the "hurdle" posed by a looming expiration of Jewish settlements. Flying to the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Shaikh on Monday, Clinton repeated US President Barack Obama's call on Friday for Israel to extend the 10-month moratorium on settlements that is due to expire on September 26. Clinton's message carried a sense of urgency, saying that the "time was ripe" for solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But she left the door open to creative solutions, urging both sides to make reciprocal gestures that would maintain the momentum in the direct

negotiations that were launched in Washington on September 2. Clinton is due to hold the second round of negotiations in Egypt with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. She is also to meet President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a key Arab mediator. "We believe that the moratorium should be extended," the chief US diplomat told reporters before her plane landed in Shannon, Ireland, for refuelling. "At the same time we recognise that an agreement that could be forged between the Israelis and the Palestinians on actions that would be taken by both sides that would enable the negotiations to continue is in the best interests of both sides," she said.

Settlement freeze The Palestinians have warned that if the moratorium is not extended, the negotiations could come to a complete halt. The current freeze has not prevented the Israeli government from approving new settlements in East Jerusalem. Clinton laughed aloud at what she saw as the irony of the Arabs sharply criticising her late last year when, during a trip to Jerusalem, she praised as "unprecedented" the partial moratorium on settlements that Netanyahu offered. "I took my fair share of the criticism," the chief US diplomat said. "It was an unprecedented decision by an Israeli government and now we're told that negotiations can't continue unless something that was viewed as being inadequate continues as well," she said. Besides Egypt, Clinton was due for talks with both leaders in Jerusalem and the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Big challenges "We understand that we face some immediate obstacles that we hope to resolve in the next couple of weeks," US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley told reporters on the eve of the talks. And Netanyahu, said Clinton, has made it clear that Israel faces severe security challenges as the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip acquire more dangerous missiles and rockets. As for Abbas, she said he has long called for a two-state solution but must prove to the Palestinian people he can achieve the goal through negotiations rather than armed resistance. When Clinton brokered the launch of direct negotiations on September 3 in Washington, both sides agreed to resolve within a year the core issues of Israeli security, borders of a Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem. The Palestinians want a state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Netanyahu has embraced a two-state solution, but has shown no sign on yielding on Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the Jewish state.

Middle East leaders in direct talks

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have met in Egypt for a second round of US-brokered direct negotiations against a backdrop of continued differences over Israel's plan to build more illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. No news emerged of any compromise on the settlements issue but Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, were reported to have held a "serious discussion" on core issues during talks in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday. Despite the challenges on the core issues - namely, Israel's security, the borders of a future Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the future of Jerusalem - the US peace envoy still believes a peace deal is possible within a year is possible. "Today the parties have begun a serious discussion on core issues," George Mitchell said

after Netanyahu and Abbas held around 100 minutes of direct talks. But Mitchell did not say which of the issues were discussed. **Moratorium urged** Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, arrived at Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday morning and urged both the Israelis and the Palestinians to find ways to clear the "hurdle" posed by a looming expiration of Jewish settlements. Earlier, she repeated President Barack Obama's call for Israel to extend the 10-month moratorium on illegal settlements that is due to expire at the end of this month. "We believe that the moratorium should be extended," she said on Monday. "At the same time we recognise that an agreement that could be forged between the Israelis and the Palestinians on actions that would be taken by both sides that would enable the negotiations to continue is in the best interests of both sides." The Palestinians have said that if the moratorium is not extended, the negotiations could come to a complete halt. The current freeze has not prevented the Israeli government from approving new settlements in East Jerusalem. "Choosing to continue with settlements in any form means destroying the negotiations," Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, said. Erekat was speaking after Netanyahu said on Sunday that he would not extend a partial building freeze, though he indicated he would curb future construction. Al Jazeera's Sherine Tadros, reporting from the Jewish settlement of Har Homa, said: "There are now half a million Jewish settlers across the occupied West Bank and that certainly has made it very difficult for anyone to envision a continuous Palestinian state because of the proximity of the settlements to Palestinian cities." Allies of Netanyahu, whose coalition is dominated by pro-settler parties, warn of a government collapse if he fails to resume expanding the illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank. Al Jazeera's Ayman Mohyeldin, reporting from Sharm el-Sheikh, said that settlements remain the main issue. "It does not look promising, but what we could see emerge is some sort of compromise, similar to what happened the last time - the Israelis agreed to stop building new settlements, but continued with what they called 'natural growth' of existing illegal settlements," he said. **'Immediate obstacles'** On the eve of the Sharm el-Sheikh talks, Philip Crowley, the US state department spokesman, said: "We understand that we face some immediate obstacles that we hope to resolve in the next couple of weeks." Clinton said Netanyahu had made it clear that Israel faces severe security challenges as the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip acquire more dangerous missiles and rockets. As for Abbas, she said he has long called for a two-state solution but must prove to the Palestinian people he can achieve the goal through negotiations rather than armed resistance. When Clinton brokered the launch of the direct negotiations on September 3 in Washington, both sides agreed that within a year, they will resolve the core issues of Israeli security, borders of a Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem. The Palestinians want a state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Netanyahu has embraced a two-state solution, but has shown no sign on yielding on Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the Jewish state.

Middle East talks to continue

At the end of the second day of direct Middle East talks, the US special envoy to the region has said that Israeli and Palestinian leaders are putting the tough issues up front in the current round of talks. But George Mitchell did not give any details on Wednesday on what was achieved during the meetings held over two days in locations in Egypt and

Israel. He said the US would continue to place a sustained role in the negotiations. With US mediation, Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas will resume the talks next week in Jerusalem. Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, will be looking to bridge the divide over Jewish settlement building when those the talks resume. The Palestinians have warned that they will walk out of talks if a freeze on settlement construction, which is set to expire at the end of the month, is not extended. But Netanyahu had suggested that some building curbs will be lifted.

'Serious discussion' Mitchell said on Tuesday that Israeli and Palestinian leaders "began a serious discussion on core issues". These are Israel's security, the borders of a future Palestinian state, the fate of Palestinian refugees and the future of Jerusalem, but he did not identify the subjects discussed. Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh, reporting from Ramallah, said that as far as the Americans are concerned, talks about peace were a must: "Many Palestinian officials tell us off the record that no American administration would allow these talks to fail so early in the process." Tuesday's talks were also expected to tackle the agenda for the negotiations, with Netanyahu reportedly wanting first to address future security arrangements and secure Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. But the Palestinians want first to define the borders of a future Palestinian state, address the status of Jerusalem and discuss the right of return of refugees who were driven out of Palestine in 1948. Besides the talks in Jerusalem on Wednesday with Netanyahu and Abbas, Clinton is due to meet Shimon Peres, the Israeli president, and Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister, as well as Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister. Mitchell, meanwhile, is due to hold talks with Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, in Damascus on Thursday, the US embassy there confirmed. US officials attending the peace talks said Mitchell would then travel to Lebanon for talks with top officials. **Hamas missing** But the important regional player that is not being engaged in these series of talks is Hamas, the Palestinian movement that controls the Gaza Strip. Hamas has opposed the talks and insists that Abbas does not have the right to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians. Ahmed Yousef, Hamas' deputy foreign minister, previously told Al Jazeera that the Palestinians were not behind Abbas. "The negotiations that the Palestinian people have tried for over two decades are pointless negotiations, the Palestinian people never gained anything from them except the loss of their cause and their rights," Ismail Rudwan, a Hamas official, said earlier this month. Larbi Sadiki, author and lecturer at the University of Exeter, argues that "sidelining Hamas in any process to craft genuine peace between Israelis and Palestinians is a glaring omission tantamount to ignoring an elephant in the room". "Hamas has reached to willing interlocutors overseas from Moscow to Oslo," Sadiki wrote recently, highlighting the willingness of the Palestinian movement to engage politically. Prominent Israelis such as Efraim Halevy, the former director of Mossad, the Israeli secret service, and Giora Eiland, a former head of Israel's National Security Council, have called for negotiating with Hamas, according to the Washington DC based Brookings Institution. Jimmy Carter, the former US president, has also said in the past that any future permanent Israeli-Palestinian agreement has to include Hamas. "Hamas has got to be involved before peace can be concluded."

No concessions in Middle East talks

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have agreed to try to reach a comprehensive peace deal within a year. Israeli and Palestinian leaders have failed in talks in Sharm el-Sheikh to resolve disputes over Jewish settlement building, but the one year timeline for a comprehensive peace deal remains, US envoy George Mitchell has said. No news emerged of any compromise on settlements or other issues emerged after talks on Tuesday between Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state and George Mitchell, the US Middle East peace envoy. Despite the lack of progress on all issues, the talks will continue in Jerusalem on Wednesday. With a 10-month Israeli moratorium on housing starts in settlements in the occupied West Bank due to expire on September 30 and without agreements on core issues including Israel's security, the borders of a future Palestinian state, the future of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees, many analysts do not hold high expectations for future talks. "Because of the lack of optimism, the negotiations are being conducted in secrecy," Al Jazeera's political analyst Marwan Bishara, said. "We don't know what precisely is going on in these two rounds", he said, after Tuesday's meeting. The current series of direct talks between Palestinian and Israeli leaders began in Washington on September 2, after a 20-month hiatus. **'Real obstacles'** Nabil Abu-Rdainah, a spokesman for the Palestinian president, described the US sponsored talks as "serious" adding that there were "still real obstacles". Al Jazeera's Ayman Mohyeldin, reporting from Sharm el-Sheikh, said that settlements remain the main issue and that any sort of agreement "does not look promising". Hillary Clinton had repeated US President Barack Obama's call for Israel to extend the 10-month moratorium on illegal settlements that is due to expire at the end of the month. But aside from those sorts of statements, which carry little weight on the ground in the occupied territories, the "Americans came pretty much empty handed" to the talks, Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh said, reporting from Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. "They [US negotiators] had no solution to bridge the gap between Palestinians and Israelis," she said.

Talks to continue "Many Palestinian officials tell us off the record that no American administration would allow these talks to fail so early in the process. "Today they talked in circles not agreeing what to talk about in Sharm el-Sheikh or Jerusalem," our correspondent said. Al Jazeera's Marwan Bishara said that settlement building is useful for Israel, because it becomes the focus of negotiations, rather than final status issues such as the future of Jerusalem or the right of return for Palestinian refugees. After talks ended in the Egyptian resort, Clinton travelled on to Jerusalem to hold further talks there, in Ramallah and in Amman, the Jordanian capital, over the next two days. As talks are set to continue, Nour Odeh said that: "Thousands of [illegal settlement] buildings are approved and ready for construction come the end of September."

Israel FM proposes redrawing border

Avigdor Lieberman says peace deal should allow Israel to incorporate settlements, while excluding Arab citizens. Lieberman's comments come as Israel and the Palestinians try to solve the deadlock over Jewish settlements [GETTY] Israel's foreign minister has said that a future peace deal with the Palestinians should centre around redrawing his country's borders, proposing to exclude some of the country's 1.3 million Arab citizens.

Avigdor Lieberman told reporters on Sunday that Israel's future borders should incorporate Jewish settlements, while placing Arab villages in Israel on the Palestinian side. "Our guiding principle in negotiations with the Palestinians must not be 'land for peace' but an exchange of territories and populations," he said. His comments come as Israel and the Palestinians began long-awaited peace negotiations earlier this month, which may collapse if the two sides fail to resolve a bitter dispute over Israeli settlements. The Palestinians have warned that they will walk out of talks if a moratorium on settlement construction, which is set to expire at the end of the month, is not extended. But Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, had suggested that some building curbs will be lifted. **Influencing policy** Al Jazeera's Nour Odeh has said that Lieberman's comments are "very important." "He's not just another 'rightwing' politician, he's Netanyahu's main coalition partner." "This has been Lieberman's position all along but that was not newsworthy when he was just a fringe politician. Now, he influences government policy." "Land for peace," the foundation on which years of peace talks with the Palestinians have been based, refers to the concept of Israel withdrawing from Palestinian territories it occupied in the 1967 war in return for an end to the conflict. Lieberman, however, says that trading land for peace "is as if someone sells you a flat and then demands that his mother-in-law continues living there." "The vigorous refusal of the Arab League and the Palestinian Authority to recognise Israel as the state of the Jewish people obliges us to make the question of the Israeli Arabs one of the main issues on the negotiating table." Lieberman, himself a resident of a West Bank settlement, has in the past campaigned for Israel's Arab citizens to be stripped of their citizenship unless they take an oath of allegiance to the Jewish state. **Netherlands ban** Meanwhile, as part of a widening circle of sanctions against Israel over its settlement policy, the Dutch government has barred five West Bank settlement mayors from entering the Netherlands on Sunday. The officials were part of a delegation of 40 Israeli mayors who had planned professional study trip to the Netherlands. In response to the Dutch authorities' decision, all Israeli mayors cancelled their trip. Linda Sasson, the spokesperson for the Union of Local Authorities in Israel, said this program has taken place in various countries in the past, but this was the first time settler mayors have been barred. The Netherlands is a member of the European Union, which has repeatedly criticised Israel's settlement plans. Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief, had earlier said: "The EU position on settlements is clear. Settlements are illegal, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two state-solution impossible." More than 500,000 Jews live in West Bank settlements deemed illegal by international law.

Reflections on upcoming peace talks

During the war of 1948, Syrian Interior Minister Sabri Al Asali appeared before Parliament in a pre-emptive move, revealing minutes of secret talks between Syrian nationalists and Zionist leaders back in 1936. The Syrian negotiators, who were all in senior posts by 1948, feared that the Israelis would unilaterally reveal details of these talks in order to embarrass Syria's top leadership during the Palestine War. With nothing to hide they came out clean on their own. Last week, the exact opposite happened in Israel when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed off prolonging confidentiality of national archives related to events before, during, and after the war of 1948. Anything

related to the early years of the Zionist state and its relationship with the Palestinians will therefore, remain classified until 2018. The timing of the ban is not accidental, as Palestinian negotiators head off to Washington DC for very controversial peace talks related to borders, security, occupied Jerusalem, and the right of return of millions of Palestinians. Many of these issues are deeply rooted in Palestinian-Israeli history. The Palestinians will arrive in the US carrying the same files they have been transferring from one world capital to another for more than 20 years, containing maps, land registration documents, photos, and copies of numerous UN Resolutions related to the Palestinian cause. If anything, placing a lid on official documents ahead of the upcoming talks — and sealing it tightly for another decade — tells volumes about how uneasy Israel is about its recent past, and how unwilling it is to hammer out a real deal with the Palestinians, related to all current and historical problems with them. Psychologically, Israel is not ready for reconciliation with the Palestinians and nor is Netanyahu — the same Netanyahu who ceded limited control around Hebron back in 1997 and famously regretted any concessions he had made. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will on Thursday in Washington hold talks with Netanyahu under U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's watchful eye. Everybody seems in a hurry, given that at midnight on September 26, a 10-month Israeli freeze on colonies will come to an end. If colony-building continues, Abbas has threatened to walk out on the talks. For obvious ideological reasons, Hamas is opposed to these talks and is expecting a speedy collapse. Hamas affiliated journalists are forcefully opposed to the talks, arguing that no deal can be reached so long as Abbas represents — at best — only 50 per cent of the Palestinians, with Gaza still under the control of Hamas. Additionally, no deal is possible so long as the siege of Gaza continues. Abbas, no doubt, has a major problem when it comes to legitimacy and Netanyahu realises that it is very difficult — but not impossible — to make peace with the Palestinian president. The leaders of Hamas know that but fear that by appealing so strongly to the Americans, Abbas is effectively drowning all pragmatism shown by them since 2009, while granting himself his final life jacket with the world community. Hamas' acceptance of the borders of 1967, its welcoming of US mediation in the peace process, and its decision not to oppose the Arab Initiative of the Beirut Summit, are all aimed at projecting it as a new interlocutor for the Americans — a substitute to Fatah. Abbas, with a strong mandate from the US, is taking action that re-brands him as the ultimate representative of the Palestinians, at least for now. Anything he signs in his final months as president, whether flawed or not, will become official — forcing whoever succeeds him, to respect and abide by or face isolation in the international community. Should they succeed — no matter how feeble the chances — these talks would be as abiding for the Palestinians as Oslo, which is something that Hamas will curtly refuse. Given that its leaders plan to overtake the upcoming parliament and eventually the Palestinian presidency as well, they are trying to break any deal before it happens, so as not to go through the burden of wrecking it after they are elected to power in a unified Palestinian state.

