

ISRAEL FREES PALESTINIAN WHO ENDED HUNGER STRIKE IN FEBRUARY

RAMALLAH: The Israeli military says a Palestinian prisoner who ended a 94-day hunger strike in February has been released to his home in the West Bank.

It says Mohammed Al-Qeq was freed yesterday. Al-Qeq went on hunger strike in November to win release from administrative detention, a practice that can keep some prisoners in custody without charges for an indefinite time. Israel says it is an important security tool to deter militant attacks.

Palestinian prisoners have used hunger strikes before to draw attention to their detention. Fearing a fasting detainee's death could spark more violence, Israel has at times acceded to their demands.

Israel has said that al-Qeq, who has worked as a journalist for a Saudi media outlet, was involved in activities linked to the militant group Hamas.—AP

TUNISIA'S ENNAHDA TO SEPARATE POLITICS FROM ISLAMIC ACTIVITY

TUNIS: Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda party will separate its religious activities from political ones, its chief said in statements published yesterday ahead of a weekend congress to formalize the change.

Rached Ghannouchi, an intellectual who once advocated a strict application of Islamic sharia law, told French daily Le Monde there was no room left in post-Arab Spring Tunisia for "political Islam". "Tunisia is now a democracy. The 2014 constitution has imposed limits on extreme secularism and extreme religion," he was quoted as saying. "We want religious activity to be completely independent from political activity."

"This is good for politicians because they would no longer be accused of manipulating religion for political means and good for religion because it would not be held hostage to politics," said Ghannouchi. His comments come on the eve of a three-day congress for Ennahda, which is part of a coalition government. Leaders say the congress will take the formal step of making the separation between political and Islamic activities. Ghannouchi, who is expected to be re-elected as party head barring any last-minute surprise, said: "We are going towards a party which specialises in political activities. We are leaving political Islam and entering democratic Islam. We are Muslim democrats who are no longer claim to represent political Islam," he added.

He described Ennahda as a "political, democratic and civil party" but said its point of reference remain rooted in the values of ancient and modern Islam. Ghannouchi and other intellectuals inspired by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood in 1981

founded the Islamic Tendency Movement, which became Ennahda in 1989.

The party was persecuted under the regime of strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his predecessor Habib Bourguiba. Ghannouchi was sentenced to jail under Bourguiba and lived in exile for 20 years, returning home after the 2011 Arab Spring uprising ousted Ben Ali.

He received a triumphant welcome from supporters and won the post-revolution election in October 2011, but two years later Ghannouchi had to step aside amid a deep political crisis. In 2014, the secularist Nidaa

Tounes party of President Beji Caid Essebsi won parliamentary elections, beating Ennahda which came second. But in January Ennahda became the single biggest party when some lawmakers quit Nidaa Tounes to form a new bloc in parliament.—AFP



TUNIS: Ennahdha Islamist party leader Rached Ghannouchi during a ceremony marking the 59th anniversary of independence.—AFP



ANKARA: Binali Yildirim, Turkey's current Transportation Minister and founding member of the AKP, Turkey's governing party, speaks during a meeting.—AP

TURKEY NAMES NEW PM AS ERDOGAN TIGHTENS GRIP

TRANSPORT MINISTER BINALI YILDIRIM BECOMES PM

ISTANBUL: Turkey's ruling party named a loyal ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the new prime minister yesterday, with the incoming premier immediately vowing to "work in total harmony" with the strongman leader. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will officially appoint Transport Minister Binali Yildirim as its chairman Sunday, meaning he will automatically become prime minister.

Yildirim will replace Ahmet Davutoglu, who stepped down after a struggle with Erdogan, as the president seeks to concentrate more power in the presidential office. "We will work in total harmony with all our party comrades at all levels, beginning with our founding president and leader," said Yildirim after being named party head, referring to Erdogan. The 60-year-old Yildirim is seen as one of Erdogan's closest long-time confidants and has served an almost unbroken stint from 2002 to 2013 as transport minister and then again from 2015. They are both strongly opposed to resuming talks with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish militant group that has claimed responsibility for several attacks across Turkey since a two-year-long ceasefire collapsed in 2015.

The new prime minister's main task, observers say, will be to pilot a change in the constitution to transform Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system, placing more power in Erdogan's hands. "And now it's time for the presidential system,"

Yildirim said earlier in May just after Davutoglu's resignation.

Another critical task facing the new prime minister will be to negotiate with the European Union on a crunch visa deal, a key plank of an accord aimed at easing the EU's migrant crisis. The visa deal has been in jeopardy over Ankara's reluctance to alter its counter-terror laws, a key requirement of the agreement, prompting Erdogan to make a series of critical statements about the EU in recent weeks.

Yildirim vowed Thursday to "rid Turkey of the calamity of terrorism". His first high profile outing as prime minister is expected to be the opening of the first World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul Monday which will be attended by German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Analysts expect that Yildirim—who has never stepped out of line with the president on a policy issue—will prove a far more pliable figure for the president than Davutoglu.

After the official appointment expected on Sunday, "the post of prime minister will have changed its meaning," said Fuat Keyman, head of the Istanbul Policy Center think-tank. "The president will become the head of the executive. The prime minister will become a functional cog," Keyman told AFP.

'Crazy' projects

After the announcement of a single candidate, Yildirim will likely be approved as new AKP leader by an extraordinary congress of the party on

Sunday.

According to AKP convention, the posts of party chief and head of government automatically go to the same figure. Erdogan will then give the new AKP leader the mandate to serve as prime minister early next week, after which a new cabinet will be announced.

As a ferry company chief and then as transport minister, Yildirim has for the last two decades worked in the transport sector, an absolutely key area in Turkey which is trying to catch up its lag in infrastructure with vast new projects.

As such, he has been a key lieutenant of Erdogan in implementing what the president likes to call his "crazy" projects to create a "New Turkey", almost always pictured in the press wearing a hard hat and fluorescent jacket.

According to the columnist for the Hurriyet daily Abdulkadir Selvi, the only serious difference between the two men is that Erdogan supports the Fenerbahce football side and Yildirim their arch Istanbul rivals Galatasaray.

The two have been close allies since Erdogan was elected mayor of Istanbul in 1994. Despite Davutoglu's shock announcement earlier this month that he was stepping down, the AKP has been keen to promote an image of unity in public.

However financial markets have not appreciated the political uncertainty, with the Turkish lira losing five percent in value against the US dollar over the last month.—AFP