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मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Israel-Iran escalation

On 19 April 2024, the Israeli military reportedly launched missile and drone strikes against Iran. An explosion was reported in the city of Isfahan which has nuclear facilities. Explosions were reported in Iraq and Syria as well, indicating Israel's retaliatory response. These strikes come in response to Tehran's attack on Israel on 13 April 2024, which involved firing around 300 hundred drones and missiles. Iran's strikes were in response to Israel's strike on Iran's Consulate in Damascus, killing seven IRGC officers. While most of Iran's projectiles were intercepted, minimal damage was reported to Israel's Nevatim Airbase, but the extent and specifics of Israel's strikes in Iran remain unclear. Iran's state news agency reported that air defence intercepted drones near Isfahan, but no damage was reported. The International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed no damage to Iran's nuclear sites. Concerns over regional conflict persist amidst ongoing tensions between Israel and Iran-backed groups. India called for immediate de-escalation, exercise of restraint, and stepping back from violence to return to the path of diplomacy.

Hamas open to truce and disarmament for five years on conditions

In an interview with the *Associated Press*, Hamas's top political official Khalil Al Hayya has suggested that Hamas would agree to a truce of five years or more with Israel, under the condition of an independent Palestinian State along pre-1967 borders. He stated that Hamas would disarm and transition into a political party if this condition were met. Al Hayya's remarks came amid a stalemate in cease-

fire talks. While Hamas's apparent willingness to disarm appears significant, it is unlikely Israel would accept such terms. Israel has vowed to crush Hamas and opposes a Palestinian state on lands captured in 1967.

GCC-US hold Foreign Ministerial Meeting

On 29 April 2024, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Saudi Arabia to attend the Joint Ministerial Meeting of the GCC and the US. Blinken emphasised the urgency of achieving a ceasefire and releasing Israeli hostages in Gaza. He highlighted US President Biden's call for Israel to take concrete and measurable steps to address humanitarian concerns. The meeting urged an immediate, long-lasting ceasefire and called on Israel to stop hostilities throughout Gaza, including the city of Rafah. They also urged Israel and Iran to exercise restraint and expressed concern over the escalating tensions in the Red Sea following the Houthi attacks. Blinken emphasised the focus on immediate needs while working towards a just and lasting peace, alongside addressing threats from Iran and ensuring freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. He stressed the importance of pursuing integration, security, and lasting peace in the region.

US approves multi-billion military aid for Israel and aid for Palestinians

US President Joe Biden signed a bill making it a law to approve a US\$ 95.3 billion foreign aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. Notably, US\$ 5.2 billion has been allocated to replenishing and expanding Israel's missile and rocket defence system, US\$ 3.5 billion to Israel for buying advanced weapons systems and

US\$ 1 billion to enhance weapons production, and US\$ 4.4 billion for other supplies and services to Israel. It has also allocated US\$ 9.2 billion for humanitarian purposes, including in the Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank. However, the bill does not have any aid provisions for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

GCC-EU High-Level Forum on Regional Security & Cooperation takes place in Luxembourg

In a high-level forum held in Luxembourg on 22 April 2024, Jasem Mohamed Albudaiwi, Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), emphasised GCC's commitment to enhancing relations with regional and global partners. The forum, focusing on security and regional cooperation between GCC countries and the EU, was chaired by Shaikh Mohammed bin Jassim Al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar and Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Amidst escalating regional tensions, Albudaiwi highlighted the need for urgent action to address destabilising factors, including Israel's military actions in Gaza and its violations of international law. He called for international condemnation of Israeli aggression and urged immediate humanitarian aid to Gaza residents. Albudaiwi also stressed the importance of international law in resolving conflicts, particularly in the Palestinian territories and Yemen. He called for the elevation of the forum to a strategic partnership, aiming to achieve security, stability and prosperity for both regions.

Turkiye's President visits Iraq

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani met in Baghdad to discuss bilateral cooperation, particularly on security, economy and energy issues. Erdogan commended Iraq's designation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a banned group and expressed determination to combat its presence in Iraqi territory. A total of 24 MoUs were signed between both countries. The leaders signed a strategic framework agreement covering security, energy and economic cooperation, along with a 10-year pact on water resource management. A preliminary agreement for the US\$ 17 billion Development Road project was signed between Qatar, Turkiye, Iraq and the UAE. Erdogan highlighted plans to enhance trade and cooperation in various sectors, including energy, health and tourism. The visit aimed to bolster Turkiye-Iraq relations amidst regional tensions. Erdogan also travelled to Erbil to discuss trade and security issues with Iraqi-Kurdish officials.

Iraq's Prime Minister visits US

In a meeting between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani on 15 April 2024, the United States and Iraq reaffirmed their enduring strategic partnership. Discussions centred on bolstering economic cooperation, advancing regional stability and reinforcing Iraq's sovereignty. Both leaders emphasised Iraq's progress towards energy self-sufficiency and underscored the importance of continuing security cooperation to prevent the resurgence of ISIS. They also discussed measures to enhance transparency in Iraq's financial

sector and combat corruption. The meeting concluded with a renewed commitment to bilateral partnership and plans for the US-Iraq Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue later this year to further discuss bilateral security cooperation.

Second US-Oman Strategic Dialogue takes place in Washington

The second US-Oman Strategic Dialogue, held in Washington on 24 April 2024, saw Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Under Secretary Jose W. Fernandez and Oman's Under Secretary for Political Affairs Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali bin Issa Al Harthy convene to discuss enhanced cooperation. Building on the inaugural dialogue's success in trade, clean energy and education, this year's discussions prioritised leveraging the US-Oman Free Trade Agreement to bolster economic ties and support Oman's Vision 2040 goals. Both sides emphasised private sector engagement, focusing on sectors like technology, semiconductors and clean energy. They also explored collaboration in carbon capture technologies and environmental research, reaffirming commitments to education and cultural exchange. Both nations aim to sustain high-level engagement with plans for the next Strategic Dialogue in 2025.

Second GCC-Central Asia Joint Ministerial Meeting on Strategic Dialogue takes place in Tashkent

The Second GCC-Central Asia Joint Ministerial Meeting on Strategic Dialogue, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on 15 April 2024, saw a comprehensive discussion on enhancing cooperation between the regions.

Topics ranged from trade and investment to environmental issues and cultural exchanges. The meeting emphasised the need for sustainable partnerships based on shared values and mutual interests, with a focus on promoting economic ties, addressing climate change and fostering cultural understanding. Participants also discussed regional and international challenges, highlighting the importance of coordination and cooperation to achieve peace, security and stability. Additionally, plans were made for future events, including investment forums and the hosting of upcoming summits. The meeting served as a platform to strengthen ties and explore avenues for collaboration between the GCC and Central Asia.

Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq visits UAE

During Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's two-day visit to the UAE from 22-23 April 2024, discussions were held between him and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, reinforcing the strong bilateral ties. Emphasising their shared commitment to regional stability and development, they exchanged views on key regional and international matters, advocating for diplomacy and adherence to international law. Economic cooperation was also highlighted, with praise for efforts to enhance trade and investment. Additionally, the UAE-Oman Business Forum yielded significant agreements totalling AED 129 billion, spanning various sectors such as renewable energy, infrastructure, and technology, aligning with the countries' mutual goals for future cooperation and prosperity.