



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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The US attacks Iran-backed militia infrastructure in Syria

The US military launched airstrikes on multiple facilities connected to Iran-backed militias in Syria. The US claims that the facilities targeted were used by Iranian-backed militant groups in Syria including Kait'ib Hezbollah and Kait'ib Sayyid Al Shuhada. The airstrikes are a response to the recent rocket attacks against US and coalition personnel in Erbil, Iraq. The airstrikes on the militia infrastructure mark the first military action under the Biden Administration in Syria. The Syrian government has condemned the attack as a "bad sign" from the new US administration. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has condemned the US airstrikes in Syria as "illegal and a violation of Syria's sovereignty".

Iran stops voluntary implementation of Additional Protocol; imposes curb on IAEA inspections

Iran has stopped the voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Safeguards Agreement on February 23. The Additional Protocol allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to carry out short-notice inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities. In December 2020, the Iranian parliament passed the 'Strategic Action Plan to Counter Sanctions' – a legislation that set February 23 as a deadline if the US does not lift its sanctions on Iran. Withdrawing from the Additional Protocol is a particularly controversial step since this will restrict the IAEA inspectors' access to Iranian nuclear facilities beyond the Safeguards Agreement.

Kuwait hosts meetings to implement Al-Ula Declaration

Official delegations from UAE and Qatar met in Kuwait for the first time since the Al-

Ula summit in January 2021 and discussed joint mechanisms and procedures to implement the Al-Ula Declaration. The two sides underscored the importance of restoring Gulf unity appreciated the Saudi effort in hosting the Al-Ula meeting. Similarly, official delegations from Egypt and Qatar held a meeting in Kuwait on February 24, 2021. The delegations intended to set mechanisms and procedures for the next phase, following Al-Ula summit and discussed the necessary means and measures that must be taken in order to enhance bilateral relations between the two countries.

Interim Government formed in Libya

At the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva on February 5, 2021, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) elected a new interim government, bringing a much needed respite to the country. The LPDF elected Mohammed Al Menfi, a former diplomat from Benghazi, to head a three-man presidency council and Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, from the western city of Misrata, to head the government as Prime Minister. The leadership also includes Musa Al Koni, from the Tuareg minority in the south, and Abdullah Al Lafi, from the west. The interim government will implement the ceasefire and oversee the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on December 24, 2021. It is also tasked with preparing for the reunification of Libya's economic and financial institutions, tackling the dire living conditions many Libyans have been forced to endure, and enacting economic reforms needed to ensure a more equitable distribution of oil revenues in the country.

Israel holds military exercise on Blue Line

Amid growing tensions between Israel and Syria, on February 15, 2021, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducted a two-day military exercise along the northern borders (Blue

Line) with Lebanon. The aim of the exercise was to enhance the combat preparedness on the northern borders. The exercise simulated various kinds of war scenarios and tested all components of air warfare, comprising aerial superiority, intelligence gathering, and attacking. The exercise was largely aimed to remain prepared for a large-scale war with Hezbollah.

Clash in Yemen's Marib province intensifies

Violent clashes have erupted between the government's forces and the Houthis in Yemen's Marib province. According to the Yemeni government, hundreds of Houthi rebels have been killed in Marib. The Houthis view the Marib city and the province's oil fields as crucial pieces of leverage they would like to seize ahead of potential future peace talks. For the Yemeni government, Marib is important as it is home to a large number of people displaced by the war and the city is strategically important for the Hadi government. The UN has issued a warning that the violence could put around two million people in danger and could potentially displace a large number of people as well. The UN believes that the offensive could also threaten potential peace talks between the parties.

Russia mediated a prisoner swap between Israel and Syria

Israel and Syria swapped one Israeli and two Syrian nationals on February 18, 2021. The exchange of prisoners was mediated by Russia at the request of Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netanyahu spoke with the Russian President Vladimir Putin asking him to help in releasing an Israeli woman who mistakenly crossed the border. The woman was exchanged for two Syrian shepherds captured by Israel.

Arab League hosts emergency meeting of foreign ministers

Egypt hosted an emergency meeting of the Arab foreign ministers to discuss the regional developments, the policies of the Biden Administration and the structure and functioning of the Arab League. The emergency meeting was held at the behest of the permanent delegations of Jordan and Egypt. The Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, emphasised that the organisation was keen to find a comprehensive and just solution to the Palestinian issue. The Foreign Minister of Egypt, Sameh Shoukry, reiterated that Cairo was working to facilitate Palestinian dialogue toward reconciliation and ascertained the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Jordanian Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi, stated that the two-state solution was the only way to end the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis and pinned hopes on the Biden Administration. Saudi Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, stressed on the Iranian nuclear threat to security and stability of the Arab world while condemning the Houthis targeting the civilian facilities in Yemen.

UAE Foreign Minister visits India

Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited India and met with External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in New Delhi. Both the ministers reviewed the growing bilateral cooperation in several fields and underscored the shared purpose and common interests between the two countries. Nahyan's visit to India comes two months after the visit of Jaishankar to the UAE in November 2020.