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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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- **Sixth India-Arab Partnership Conference held in Delhi**
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- **US deploys Destroyer, F-35s and F-16s in the Gulf**
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- **Turkish President Erdogan visits Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE**
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- **Secretary General of Muslim World League visits India**
- **Muraleedharan visits Syria**

Prime Minister Modi visits the UAE

On 15 July 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the UAE and held a meeting with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE in Abu Dhabi. The discussions encompassed various topics including trade and investment, fintech, energy, renewables, climate action, higher education and people-to-people ties. Three MoUs were signed between India and the UAE during the visit. The MoU between the Reserve Bank of India and the UAE Central Bank aims to promote using local currencies (INR and AED) for cross-border transactions. The second MoU aimed at enhancing bilateral cooperation by interlinking their payment and messaging systems. Besides, an MoU was signed between the Ministry of Education of India, the Department of Education and Knowledge, Abu Dhabi, and IIT Delhi to pave the way for establishing an IIT Delhi campus in Abu Dhabi. A joint statement on climate change was issued reflecting their commitment to furthering partnership and addressing global challenges together.

Sixth India-Arab Partnership Conference held in Delhi

Under the banner of the Arab-Indian Cooperation Forum, the 6th India-Arab Partnership Conference on “New Horizons in Investment, Trade & Services” took place on 11-12 July 2023 in New Delhi. The conference facilitates a robust engagement between business communities from the Arab States and India; and serves as a platform to enhance economic cooperation between the two. Shri V. Muraleedharan, Minister of State for External Affairs, inaugurated the event and emphasised the

crucial role of the private sector in expanding trade and investment relations. The discussions centred on investment climates, opportunities and collaboration in sectors like healthcare, food security, energy security and resilient supply chains.

6th GCC-Russia Strategic Dialogue held in Moscow

The sixth GCC-Russia Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue took place in Moscow. The meeting was attended by the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov. They emphasised the importance of their strategic dialogue in enhancing bilateral relations and achieving global peace, security and stability through adherence to international law and non-interference in internal affairs. The Ministers condemned terrorism and expressed support for efforts to resolve the crisis in Ukraine. They welcomed the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and stressed the need for mutual respect and adherence to international norms. They discussed regional issues in Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Afghanistan, emphasising the importance of political solutions and cooperation. The Ministers also focused on energy, climate change, health, education, cultural exchanges, and sports as areas of collaboration.

US deploys Destroyer, F-35s and F-16s in the Gulf

The US has deployed a combination of F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters and F-16 Falcon fighters, along with the guided-missile destroyer USS Thomas Hudner, to the Persian Gulf to escort ships in and out

of the Strait of Hormuz. The move comes in response to continuing threats from Iranian forces attempting to seize merchant ships in the region. The US aims to bolster its presence and ability to monitor the strategic waterway and safeguard the free flow of commerce. The recent attack on the merchant ship *Richard Voyager* by an Iranian Navy corvette on 5 July off the Coast of Oman has prompted these actions. The US has been increasing its focus on the Pacific and Europe, but this deployment demonstrates renewed attention to the West Asian region as a naval theatre.

GCC-Central Asian Summit takes place in Jeddah

The GCC and Central Asian States held their first-ever summit in Jeddah, focusing on strengthening political and strategic relations between the two regions. The joint statement emphasised the importance of cooperation in achieving regional and international security, ensuring supply chain flexibility, improving transportation, food security, energy security and water security. The leaders also called for increased cooperation in renewable and green energy sources, business opportunities, investment support, and trade. The leaders agreed to enhance partnerships in various fields, including political and security dialogue, economic and investment cooperation, education, culture, youth affairs, tourism, media and sports. The leaders condemned terrorism and called for joint efforts to combat it.

Turkish President Erdogan visits Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. Saudi Arabia and Turkey signed five MoU

covering defence, industry, research and investment sectors. An Implementation Plan for Cooperation between the Turkish and Saudi Arabian defence ministries was also agreed upon. Notably, a landmark “Bayraktar AKINCI TIHA export and cooperation agreement” allowed Saudi Arabia to acquire the Bayraktar AKINCI TIHA drone, paving the way for technology transfer and joint production. His Qatar visit involved discussions with Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamed Al Thani, leading to the signing of a joint statement emphasising the strategic partnership between Turkiye and Qatar. During his visit to the UAE, both countries signed a US\$ 50.7 billion deal, thereby further consolidating their bilateral relations. Thirteen documents were signed, and both nations agreed to establish a “High-Level Strategic Council” chaired by their respective presidents.

Israel’s parliament passes reasonableness bill

Continuing the Israeli judicial reform, on 24 July 2023, Israel’s parliament ratified the “reasonableness bill.” The amendment removes the judiciary’s ability to void executive decisions based on “unreasonableness”, but other legal grounds can still be used to challenge government actions. Critics fear this change could lead to corruption and undermine checks on government power, while supporters argue it will enhance governance and policymaking. The move sparked a huge uproar leading to protests in several places across the country.

Iraq and TotalEnergies sign US\$ 27 billion deal

Iraq and French energy conglomerate TotalEnergies have signed a momentous

US\$ 27 billion energy deal. The agreement, initially signed in 2021, encountered significant delays due to internal disputes among Iraqi politicians but reached fruition in April when Iraq accepted a reduced stake of 30 per cent in the project. TotalEnergies will assume a commanding 45 per cent stake, with QatarEnergy securing the remaining 25 per cent. The ambitious Gas Growth Integrated Project comprises four key initiatives to bolster Iraq's energy production capacity. Notable components include harnessing flared gas for electricity at oilfields, establishing a one GW solar power plant to serve Basra's regional grid (with potential involvement from Saudi company ACWA Power), and implementing a seawater-based treatment plant for sustainable oil production. The project aims to attract foreign investments to revitalize Iraq's energy sector and reignite its oil production prospects.

US-Arab League Strategic Dialogue takes place in Washington D.C.

The US and the Arab League held a strategic dialogue in Washington D.C. addressing a wide range of issues. Both parties pledged to increase cooperation to promote peace, security, stability, integration, and economic prosperity. They discussed pressing matters such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nonproliferation and arms control. Condemning threats against commercial ships, they committed to enhancing security in the region's strategic waterways. The talks emphasised community engagement and countering terrorism, particularly against ISIS and Al Qaeda. Additionally, they resolved to ensure the representation of women's voices in COP28.

Secretary General of Muslim World League visits India

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulkarim Al Issa, the Muslim World League Secretary General, visited India and met with President Draupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other political and religious leaders. Al Issa praised India's unique and peaceful coexistence of communities, appreciating the country's history and diversity. He stated that Indian institutions and leaders prioritise peace, tolerance and understanding over dominance. His visit aimed to engage with different components of Indian society and promote religious awareness globally. Al Issa highlighted that Indian Muslims take pride in their constitution, nation and brotherhood with the rest of society. He commended Indian wisdom for contributing to humanity and emphasised the importance of coexistence in the country.

Muraleedharan visits Syria

Shri V. Muraleedharan, Minister of State for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs, officially visited Syria and held discussions with Syrian President Bashar Al Assad and Prime Minister Hussein Arnous. They explored avenues for development partnership assistance, education and capacity building. Syria lauded India's humanitarian support, especially after the devastating earthquake in February 2023. To strengthen educational cooperation, Muraleedharan announced 300 new scholarships for Syrian students to study in India and assured the timely supply of anti-cancer medicines to Syria. He also interacted with Syrian students who have studied or are planning to study in India and visited the NextGen India Syria Center of Excellence in Information Technology in Damascus.