



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Surging tension in the Red Sea

Attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea by the Houthis have heightened regional and geopolitical tensions in West Asia. The Houthi attacks have prompted the US, the UK and several other countries to deploy their warships and have launched attacks on several Houthi targets in Yemen. The US-led military operation known as the ‘Operation Prosperity Guardian’, is intended to protect the freedom of navigation and commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It is a multi-national military coalition under the umbrella of the Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of Task Force 153. More than 20 countries including Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain have joined the Operation. This crisis has led to surging shipping costs, potential inflation, and global delays.

Indian Navy responds to hijacking and piracy in the Arabian Sea

On 5 January 2024, the Indian Navy responded swiftly to a hijacking attempt on the Liberian-flagged Bulk Carrier MV Lila Norfolk in the North Arabian Sea. The Navy deployed a robust force of ships and aircraft, including the INS Chennai guided missile destroyer, MQ9B (Sea Guardian), P8I and integral helicopters. The naval assets conducted continuous aerial reconnaissance of MV Lila Norfolk. All 21 crew members of MV Lila Norfolk were successfully rescued and are reported safe. In another incident, on 17 January 2024, INS Visakhapatnam, mission-deployed in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations, promptly reacted to a distress call from the Marshall Island flagged MV Genco Picardy, which reported a drone attack.

Further, Indian Navy’s mission-deployed warship, INS Sumitra, engaged in anti-piracy operations along the East coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, successfully secured the release of an Iranian-flagged Fishing Vessel Iman on 29 January 2024. The vessel had been hijacked by pirates, and its crew was taken hostage. Responding to a distress message, INS Sumitra intercepted the hijacked vessel forcing the pirates to release all 17 crew members safely along with the boat.

India-Saudi Arabia hold joint military exercise ‘Sada Tanseeq’

The inaugural edition of the India-Saudi Arabia Joint Military Exercise ‘Sada Tanseeq’ commenced in Mahajan, Rajasthan, marking a significant step in bilateral defence cooperation. The exercise involves 45 personnel from each side, with the Saudi Arabian contingent represented by the Royal Saudi Land Forces and the Indian Army contingent by a Battalion from the Brigade of the Guards (Mechanised Infantry). The primary aim is to train troops for joint operations in semi-desert terrain under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. The exercise includes various activities such as mobile vehicle check posts, cordon and search operations, house intervention drills, reflex shooting, slithering, and sniper firing, fostering interoperability and camaraderie between the two friendly nations.

Qatar launches Third National Development Strategy 2024-2030

Qatar has launched its third National Development Strategy for the period 2024-2030, marking the final phase of the Qatar National Vision 2030. The strategy aims to achieve sustainable economic growth by

expanding gas production and fostering economic diversification. It also focuses on financial sustainability, improving workforce productivity, and establishing a versatile workforce with a target of 46 per cent skilled workers. The plan includes measures to enhance societal cohesion and elevate the standard of living of the people. Environmental sustainability is a key aspect of the Strategy, with goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and optimise resource consumption. Additionally, the strategy aims to establish world-class government services, emphasising digitisation and efficient data exchange between entities.

US and Iraq commence talks on ending military coalition

The US and Iraq initiated the first round of formal talks in Baghdad on 27 January 2024 to discuss the end of the mission of the US-led military coalition combating ISIS in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani confirmed his sponsorship of the dialogue. The talks coincide with ongoing drone attacks on the US forces in Iraq and Syria by militia groups. The US intends to establish a committee for negotiating the terms of the coalition's conclusion. Although the US has had a continuous presence since 2003, combat forces left in 2011, returning in 2014 to combat ISIS. The issue of coalition withdrawal has resurfaced periodically, with recent attacks attributed to Iran-backed militias expressing opposition. The US has retaliated, leading to tensions over Iraq's sovereignty. Despite the US clarification that the decision predates the recent attacks, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed credit for the talks, asserting the Americans comprehend only the "language of force" and vowing to

persist in their attacks. In Jordan, three US Army soldiers were killed, and over 30 service members were injured in a drone attack on an American military outpost.

US designates Houthis as a terrorist group

In a press statement released on 17 January 2024, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken announced the designation of Ansarallah, commonly known as the Houthis, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group. The designation, effective 30 days from the announcement, comes in response to the Houthis' unprecedented attacks on international maritime vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These attacks have not only jeopardised the safety of mariners but also disrupted commerce and impeded navigational rights. The designation aimed to hold the Houthis accountable for their terrorist activities, with a commitment to reassess if attacks in the designated regions cease. Despite the accountability focus, the press statement emphasised efforts to mitigate adverse impacts on Yemeni civilians, including robust outreach for humanitarian assistance and licenses authorising specific transactions related to essential commodities.

Saudi Arabia signals openness to recognise Israel

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, stated on 16 January 2024 at the World Economic Forum in Davos that the Kingdom could recognise Israel as part of a comprehensive agreement that includes statehood for the Palestinians. He emphasised the importance of peace for both Israel and Palestine, indicating Saudi Arabia's openness to recognition of Israel.

On 18 January 2024 at Davos, Israel's President Isaac Herzog described the normalisation of ties with Saudi Arabia as a potential game-changer for the region and a key to ending the Gaza conflict.

21st Astana summit on Syria held

The 21st International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format was held from 24-25 January 2024 in Astana, where representatives of Iran, Russia and Turkiye issued a joint statement. Key points include a reaffirmation of the Astana Process's pivotal role in settling the Syrian crisis and addressing the impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on Syria. The statement expressed deep concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, calling for an immediate ceasefire. The guarantor countries underscored their commitment to Syria's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. They emphasised efforts to combat terrorism, revitalise relations between Turkiye and Syria; and facilitate the safe return of Syrians. The statement also touched upon the situation in Idlib, rejection of illegitimate self-rule initiatives, condemnation of Israeli military attacks, and a call for a Syrian-led political process. The meeting was attended by representatives of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross as observers.

ICJ orders provisional measures on Gaza

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an order on 26 January 2024 in the case brought by South Africa against Israel on 29 December 2023 concerning alleged violations of the Genocide Convention in the Gaza Strip. The ICJ has directed Israel,

by a majority vote, to take actions within its power to prevent acts specified in the Convention, ensure its military refrains from such acts, combat incitement to commit genocide, provide basic services and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, and preserve evidence related to alleged acts of genocide. Israel is also required to submit a report on measures taken within one month. Two judges dissented on some points. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that ICJ's decision has not ordered a ceasefire in the war in Gaza and rejected a charge of genocide. Palestinian Authority stated that the ICJ order is an important reminder that no state is above the law. South Africa marked the verdict as a decisive victory for the international rule of law.

UNRWA terminates employees on allegation of participating in October 7 attack

On 26 January 2024, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has terminated the contracts of nine of its staff members and initiated an investigation against them for their alleged involvement in the October 7 attack on Israel. Earlier, Israel provided evidence of the involvement of UNRWA employees in the attack. Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA Commissioner-General, stated that any UNRWA employee found involved in acts of terror would be held accountable, including potential criminal prosecution. Many countries including the US, the UK, Japan, Australia, Italy, Germany, Canada, Netherlands and Finland have announced to suspend funding for UNRWA for the time being.