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# WEST ASIA DIGEST

*Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia*

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## **GCC holds 42nd annual summit in Riyadh**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held its 42<sup>nd</sup> summit in Riyadh and discussed key issues of economy, politics, climate change, regional security, and the Iranian nuclear issue. During the summit, the GCC countries alleged Iran of its involvement in destabilising activities in the region through proxy groups. They deliberated on the Iranian nuclear issue and stated that GCC's relations with Iran will be determined by its nuclear deal as the talks continue in Vienna. The leaders also asserted the need to work collectively to deal with challenges posing a threat to security and stability in the region. They accentuated that dialogue is the key to resolve the conflicts in the region – Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Libya. On the economic front, the leaders discussed the strategic and integration projects in the fields of investment and development. They highlighted the importance of digital transformation in the Gulf region and the need to boost the role of youths and women in the development process. The leaders also discussed the significance of enhancing cooperation to continue preventing the spread of pandemic and encouraged further proposals to deal with their economic and social repercussion, travel condition and movement among the GCC countries. On climate change, the leaders stressed the importance of joint cooperation aimed at achieving sustainability and implementing the circular carbon economy which was launched by Saudi Arabia during its presidency of G20.

## **US announces end of its combat mission in Iraq**

The US military combat mission in Iraq officially ended on December 9 after a final

round of transitional talks with Iraqi officials. Biden Administration had earlier announced that it intended to shut down the combat mission in Iraq by December 31. There are currently around 2500 US troops in Iraq helping the Iraqi security forces to deal with the remnants of the ISIS. Some of them will continue to remain in the country in order to provide assistance, training and advises to help the Iraqi military face the challenges in future.

## **Saudi Crown Prince tours GCC countries before the GCC summit**

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman undertook visits to the neighbouring GCC countries – Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, intended to bridge differences among members of the GCC, strengthen relations between Riyadh and its neighbours, and coordinate policies issues of common concern. Oman was the first stop for him where both countries announced the opening of the first land crossing – a 725 km road which will facilitate the smooth movement of people and integrate the supply chain. Both the countries signed 13 MoUs for cooperation worth US\$ 30 billion; and the Saudi Public Investment Fund also announced that it would invest US\$ 5 billion in Oman. During the Saudi prince visit to Bahrain, both sides announced to establish Saudi-Bahrain Holding Company which aims at creating joint investment projects. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain also reviewed cooperation between Bahrain's Oil and Gas Holding Company and Saudi Aramco, with a focus on oil and gas, circular economy and hydrogen production technology.

The Kuwaiti Emir awarded the Saudi Crown Prince the Order of Kuwait. The Emir stated that the visit of Mohammad

bin Salman would fortify his country's ties with Saudi Arabia, which is crucial for the current situation in the region. Kuwait also hailed its close cooperation with Riyadh within the framework of Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Plus to safeguard stability of the global oil market, while underlining the importance of continuing this cooperation and the need for all participating countries to adhere to the OPEC Plus agreement. During his visit to UAE, a joint statement was issued by Saudi Arabia and UAE in Abu Dhabi, where both the sides vowed to further boost their coordination to ensure security and stability in the region. UAE also awarded the Saudi Crown Prince with Zayed Medal, UAE's highest honour. Saudi Crown Prince's visit to Qatar marks his first trip to the country since Riyadh and its allies imposed a blockade on Doha. His visit to Qatar and Gulf speaks of his efforts to position him as a regional leader.

### **First-ever visit by an Israeli Prime Minister to the UAE**

The Israeli Prime Minister Neftali Bennett visited the UAE marking the first-ever visit by any Israeli Prime minister to the Emirate. Bennett was hosted by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and also met with UAE Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology, Dr Sultan bin Ahmed Al Jaber and Culture Minister Noura bint Mohammed Al Kaabi. The major areas of discussion between the two leaders included private and public sector cooperation in research and development, food security, technology, climate, water, energy, health and tourism. The visit was also significant as it aimed at strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries, which was established in September 2020 with the signing of the

Abraham Accords. Alongside, around 70 agreements and MoUs have also been signed between the two countries across various fields in the last year.

### **Guterres visits Lebanon and reaffirms UN's support for the country**

The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, visited Lebanon and met with a number of Lebanese politicians, including President Michel Aoun, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri. The visit came at a time when the country is going through a massive political instability and an economic crisis. Lebanon has registered a massive fall in the value of the currency and faces an acute shortage of basic amenities such as food, gas and electricity. Guterres criticised the government of Lebanon for inadequate investigation of the Beirut Blast and accused Lebanese politicians for paralyzing the country. He reaffirmed the UN's support to the people of Lebanon and said that "international community has not done enough to support" the country. He also added that the conflict in Syria has taken a heavy toll on the Lebanese economy, security and society.

### **Israeli Defence Minister visits US amid the Vienna talks**

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz visited the US and met with various top officials of the US government. He was received by US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and both the leaders reviewed the common strategic challenges facing the two countries and held detailed discussions on the Iranian nuclear threat. Gantz apprised the US officials about the Israeli deadline over preparation of military strikes against Iran. Some of the US officials also brought

up the issue of settlement activities in the West Bank and their concerns for the two-state solution. He also met with US Secretary of State, Blinken and discussed the security concerns of Israel vis-à-vis Iran, while emphasising the opportunities to expand peace and normalisation in the region. In his speech at the Israeli American Council in Florida, Gantz stated that Israel has a moral, strategic and operational obligation to maintain military superiority in the light of growing anti-Israeli sentiments. The visit took place parallel to the talks in Vienna on the Iranian nuclear programme and underlined Israel's growing insecurity regarding the same.

### **Libya's presidential elections postponed**

The presidential elections of Libya scheduled to be held on December 24 has been postponed and a new date is expected to be announced in a month's time. The Libyan parliamentary committee stated that it had become impossible to hold the presidential elections on the pre-scheduled date. There were inadequacies in electoral legislation; and the election commission received a number of appeals regarding the candidates' eligibility as well. The Libyan political leadership could not agree on the rules overseeing the elections and the powers to be invested with the institutions of the president and the parliament. The Libyan election commission had also failed to name a final list of candidates, and it disbanded electoral committees prior to the election. Meanwhile, the parliament has ordered to form a committee to create a roadmap for the presidential election and submit a proposal. Negotiations are continuing among the potential candidates, institutions and external powers to reach a consensus on holding the election. There

have been growing concerns that a prolonged political vacuum will lead to renewed violence and economic crisis in the country.

### **Turkey's Lira makes a comeback after new plan unveiled**

The Turkish lira made a comeback after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced measures to combat its recent losses in value this month. As per the Turkish Ministry of Treasury and Finance, the new measures will consist of special 'currency rate protected' accounts with minimum of three months. It further stated that the government plans to compensate for any depreciation in Lira between the time the account is open and when it is closed. Turkey aims to make its nationals save in Lira rather than foreign currency or gold etc. The effect was immediate with the Lira rising from 18 per dollar to 11 per dollar within a day.

### **External Affairs Minister visits UAE**

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited UAE and discussed bilateral and strategic relationship between the two countries during his meeting with the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Both the leaders deliberated on further cooperation and joint action to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries. They also discussed and exchanged views on regional and international issues of common interest for both. Dr. Jaishankar also participated in the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Ocean Conference held in Abu Dhabi on December 4-5.