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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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New coalition government formed in Israel

A new coalition government took charge in Israel on June 14, 2021, breaking the political stalemate in the country. It is a rotation government in which Naftali Bennett will serve as Prime Minister for the first two years followed by Yair Lapid for the next two years. The government comprises of eight political parties namely, Yesh Atid, Yamina, Blue and White, Labour, Meretz, Ra'am, New Hope and Yisrael Beiteinu. A significant feature of this government is that for the first time an Arab political party is included in the ruling coalition. The coalition has a razor-thin majority of a single member in the parliament raising questions about the durability of the government.

Ebrahim Raisi elected as 13th President of Iran

In the Iranian presidential election held on June 19, Chief Justice of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, has emerged victorious. He won nearly 62 percent of the total votes cast. The voter turnout in the election was under 49 percent, lowest turnout for a presidential election since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Raisi is widely believed to be close to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and is handpicked by him to be the president of the country. Raisi is an ultraconservative who is under sanction by the US as well as the EU.

Israeli Foreign Minister visits UAE

The Foreign Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid, visited UAE on June 28-29, 2021. During the visit, Lapid met with his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and discussed ways to further

strengthen the bilateral relations. He inaugurated the Embassy of Israel in Abu Dhabi and a consulate in Dubai and termed it a "historic moment." His statements during the visit made it clear that the new government not only wishes to continue with the normalisation process initiated by the previous government but also wishes to proactively carry it forward.

US announces new round of sanctions on Houthis

The US announced new sanctions against several individuals and entities allegedly involved in smuggling operations that has provided considerable funding for the Houthis. The sanctions block any US property they hold and bars American nationals from doing business with them. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the administration will continue to apply pressure on the Houthis, including through targeted sanctions, to advance those goals. He also reiterated a call for the Houthis to accept a nationwide ceasefire and a resumption of talks on a political settlement to the seven-year-old conflict.

US lifts sanctions on some Iranian nationals and entities

The US lifted sanctions on a number of former officials with National Iranian Oil Company as well as a number of Iranian entities involved in shipping and trading petrochemical products. The Biden administration describes these moves as administrative, reflecting a change in circumstances that warranted the removal of the sanctions. This step can also be viewed as a result of on-going talks over reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. A new

round of those talks is set to begin in Vienna in July.

Joint Arab air exercise Tuwaiq 2 held in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Jordan and Egypt, launched a joint air exercise named Tuwaiq 2 in Al Kharj in Saudi Arabia. Kuwait and Bahrain participated as observers in the exercise. According to the Saudi Ministry of Defence the exercise “aims to ensure the highest levels of readiness, and achieve operational compatibility and integration.” Lt. Col. Mohammed Ibrahim bin Sufyan, Commander of the Exercise, stated that “The exercise aims to raise the operational and training readiness for tactical airdrops and raise the spirit of competition among the participants.”

Ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

The Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS met in Rome on June 28 and reaffirmed their shared determination to continue the fight against the outfit while creating conditions for enduring defeat of the terrorist group, through a comprehensive, coordinated and multifaceted effort. The Ministers welcomed Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mauritania, and Yemen as they joined the coalition recently. They acknowledged the efforts of Iraq, the European Union and Afghanistan to counter the remnants of ISIS and prevent its resurgence while expressing concern over ISIS networks in sub-Saharan Africa and the situation of ISIS detainees in northeast Syria. The

Coalition reaffirmed its belief that a comprehensive and collective effort remains necessary to achieve a full and enduring defeat of ISIS worldwide.

Second Berlin Conference on Libya held

Representatives of 17 countries, United Nations, African Union, European Union, Arab League met in Berlin to participate in the Second Berlin Conference on Libya and reaffirmed the commitments made in the Conclusions of the First Berlin Conference on Libya of January 19, 2020. Due to the decrease in hostilities, ceasefire and the lifting of oil shutdown, Libyan-led political dialogue resumed under the auspices of the United Nations. The conference concluded that more needs to be done to address and resolve the underlying causes of conflict and consolidate Libyan sovereignty. The need is to build on the progress made and restore peace and prosperity for all Libyans. The representatives agreed that all foreign forces and mercenaries need to be withdrawn from Libya and the security sector needs to be reformed. At the same time, they added there should be a transparent and fair allocation of resources across the country; and the human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law must be addressed.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh visits Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon after clashes with Israel

The head of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, visited Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon in June following its clashes with Israel in the Gaza Strip. He visited Egypt on June 8, 2021, after receiving an invitation from Cairo. The aim of his visit

was to discuss ways to reinforce the ceasefire agreement with Israel and deliberate on the reconstruction plan for Gaza. After Egypt, Haniyeh visited Morocco and met with a number of political leaders. As Morocco has agreed to normalise relations with Israel, Haniyeh's visit sought broader support for Palestinians after the Gaza conflict. During his visit to Lebanon, he met several top officials, including President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. Importantly, Haniyeh met with Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah and both the leaders discussed how they can build on the experience of the latest round of violence in Gaza.

External Affairs Minister visits Kuwait

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar made a three-day state visit to Kuwait on June 9, 2021, as part of the enhanced high level political exchanges between the two countries. India and Kuwait are celebrating 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. During the visit, both the countries signed an MoU for cooperation on the recruitment of domestic workers which will bring the Indians working in Kuwait under the ambit of legal framework. The two sides reiterated their commitment to overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic especially related to the travel restrictions and vaccination, and deliberated on the issues pertaining to food security, cybersecurity, energy sector and the Indian workforce in Kuwait.

India and Saudi Arabia sign MoU on Yoga

India and Saudi Arabia signed a MoU for promotion of Yoga on June 21 that is observed as the International Yoga Day. Saudi Ministry of Sports' Leaders Development Institute and the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga affiliated with India's Ministry of Ayush signed the MoU that intends to pave way for the establishment of formal yoga standards and courses in Saudi Arabia. The MoU will also facilitate collaboration in research, education and training in the field of yoga.

First Arab India Energy Forum held virtually

The first Arab-India Energy Forum (AIEF) meeting took place in a virtual format and was co-chaired by India and Morocco. The sessions of the Forum explored potential and challenges of cooperation in the fields of energy transition, intra-regional power trading, hydrocarbons and nuclear power generation. The Forum focused on the best practices in the fields of energy efficiency programs for different economic sectors, accelerated development of new and renewable energy and fostering regional power-sharing arrangements, along with national regulatory policies. The second edition of the AIEF will be convened in India in 2023.