



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*

- **US to launch Mideast Drone Force**
- **US to extend defence facilities to UAE and Saudi Arabia**
- **Israeli Prime Minister's first ever visit to Bahrain**
- **Iranian President visits Qatar**
- **US imposes new sanctions on IRGC and Houthis**
- **Iraqi government formation is at a stalemate**
- **Israel approves new route for gas exports to Egypt via Jordan**
- **India and Oman conduct joint military exercise**
- **India and UAE hold virtual summit**

### **US to launch Mideast Drone Force**

Amid growing tension with Iran, the US Navy's Bahrain-based fifth fleet announced to launch a new joint fleet of drones along with allied countries. The focus of the fleet will be to patrol the large portion of West Asia's waters. According to Vice Adm. Brad Cooper (Commander of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet), the fleet with 100 drones (Sailing and Submersing) will significantly improve the surveillance capacity of the US navy and will allow it to closely track the vital global oil and shipping lanes. The international maritime routes in the Gulf waters have been targeted multiple times by militias and the US plans to launch the drone fleet is intended to tackle such challenges.

### **US to extend defence facilities to UAE and Saudi Arabia**

The US announced that it will extend its defence expertise and systems to UAE and Saudi Arabia. This decision has come in the aftermath of continuous drone attacks on both the countries. Responsibility for both the attacks was claimed by the Houthis, and these attacks were targeted at civilian infrastructures. The US strongly condemned the attack on Saudi Arabia; and it has stated that Washington is working with Abu Dhabi and other regional and global partners, to develop better solutions to stop drone attacks, even before they are launched.

### **Israeli Prime Minister's first ever visit to Bahrain**

Israel's Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, visited Bahrain for the first time on February 15 and discussed bilateral issues with Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al

Khalifa. During the visit, both the leaders discussed the opportunity to deepen ties between the "peoples of both nations in social, economic and security matters". They also discussed strategic and security relations to deal with regional problems such as terrorism, extremism, nuclear threat, poverty and social challenges. In addition, a detailed discussion was also held to strengthen economic, business, and trade relations between the two countries. They also agreed upon 10-years plan called "The Joint Warm Peace Strategy" which "will serve as a roadmap for the development of relations". This strategy will focus on the expansion of relations in the areas such as food and security, innovation, energy, education, healthcare, trade, student exchange and investment.

### **Iranian President visits Qatar**

Iran President Ebrahim Raisi visited Qatar on February 21. This is the first foreign visit by President Raisi, and is seen as an opportunity to further strengthen the diplomatic and economic ties between the two countries. The visit concluded with the signing of 14 different agreements, which covers different sectors of cooperation including trade, sea and air transportation, electricity, culture and education.

### **US imposes new sanctions on IRGC and Houthis**

The Biden administration unveiled new sanctions targeting what it called an "international network" that is supposedly controlled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for the purpose of raising funds to support Yemen's Houthi rebels. The sanctions order targets individuals and companies based all over the world, including India, Singapore,

Sweden, Turkey, and the UAE. Meanwhile, UAE unveiled its own anti-Houthi sanctions, blacklisting one individual and five entities allegedly linked to the Yemeni rebels.

### **Iraqi government formation is at a stalemate**

The next stage in Iraq's government formation process-parliament's election of a president is may be on ice for the moment after the Supreme Federal Court ruled that Kurdish politician and former Iraqi Finance Minister Hoshyar Zebari cannot stand for the office of president. The court had issued an interim ruling suspending Zebari's candidacy but this ruling is final and should stick. The ruling preceded a planned parliamentary vote on the presidency the following day that had to be postponed due to lack of a quorum. Zebari probably had enough parliamentary support to unseat incumbent Barham Salih as he was backed by both the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Muqtada Al Sadr's bloc, but Sadr appeared to withdraw his support amid the court case.

### **Israel approves new route for gas exports to Egypt via Jordan**

The Israeli Ministry of Energy has approved to begin gas export to Egypt via Jordan. The approved route is the second route to export gas through pipeline from Israel to Egypt and it goes through the Jordanian gas transmission system located in the northeast of Israel, then to the city of Aqaba, and eventually to Egypt. According to estimations, due to the new route, the gas export is expected to reach 2.5 to 3 billion cubic metres (BCM) in 2022 and may reach 4 BCM in subsequent years. Currently, Israel uses its own transmission system to

deliver gas to Egypt. The new route will strengthen trade relations between Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

### **India and Oman conduct joint military exercise**

India and Oman concluded a five-day air combat exercise known as "Eastern Bridge" in Jodhpur on February 25. From Indian Air Force, a fleet of Sukhoi-30MKIs, Jaguar and Mirage-2000 fighter jets took part while the Royal Air Force of Oman deployed its F-16 jets in the exercise. The aim of the exercise was to "enhance operational capability and interoperability between the two Air Forces". The exercise was conducted a few weeks after the visit of Oman's top defence official Mohammed Nasser Al Zaabi to India from January 30 to February 4. Oman is considered India's strong defence partner in the Gulf and it has extensive security ties with India.

### **India and UAE hold virtual summit**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan held a virtual summit on February 18. Both the countries issued a joint vision statement "Advancing India and UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: New Frontiers, New Milestone". The joint vision statement establishes a roadmap for a future-oriented partnership between India and UAE; and identifies focus areas and outcomes. The shared objective is to promote new trade, investment and innovation dynamics in diverse sectors, including economy, energy, climate action, emerging technologies, skills and education, food security, healthcare and defence and security.