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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Jaishankar visits UAE

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, visited the UAE on 23 June 2024. During his visit, Jaishankar met with the Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and reviewed the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, noting progress in areas such as commerce, fintech, education, people-to-people connect and culture. Both ministers deliberated on possibilities for new collaborative opportunities and discussed regional and global issues. Jaishankar participated in the 10th International Day of Yoga at the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi and visited the BAPS Hindu Mandir, which has welcomed one million visitors since its February 2024 inauguration by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Jaishankar's visit underscores the significance of the India-UAE bilateral relationship, which is marked by high-level visits and significant bilateral achievements.

CENTCOM countermeasures in Red Sea following Houthi attacks

On 23 June 2024, Iranian-backed Houthis launched a suspected uncrewed aerial system (UAS) attack on the M/V Trans World Navigator, a Liberian-flagged, Greek-owned bulk cargo carrier. It was en route from Malaysia to Egypt. The attack resulted in minor injuries to the crew and moderate damage to the vessel, which remains underway. This incident marks the fourth attack by the Houthis on this ship. Over the days, US CENTCOM forces have been destroying Houthi USVs in the Red Sea, which posed imminent threats to the US, coalition and merchant vessels. This action is aimed to protect freedom of

navigation and ensure the safety of international waters. Additionally, on 22 June, Houthis launched three anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) from Yemen into the Gulf of Aden, but no injuries or significant damage were reported. CENTCOM stated that Houthi's claims of a successful attack on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) are categorically false. Meanwhile, since 31 May 2024, Houthi forces have arbitrarily detained and forcibly abducted dozens of civil society members, including at least 13 UN staff, following the Yemeni government's decision to relocate major banks from Houthi-controlled territory. These detainees have been denied access to lawyers and families, amounting to enforced disappearances.

Tensions rise between Hezbollah and Israel

During Eid al-Adha, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack northern Israel while asserting that Hezbollah's involvement supports Hamas in Gaza rather than seeking direct conflict. In a psychological warfare move, Hezbollah released drone footage of Haifa, prompting Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz to warn of a potential change in rules that could severely impact Hezbollah and Lebanon. On 18 June 2024, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed that plans for an attack in southern Lebanon had been approved, adding that steps had been taken to accelerate readiness in the field. Despite both sides seemingly avoiding war, tensions have escalated, with Israel preparing offensive plans and increasing reservist caps while cross-border strikes and retaliatory attacks continue.

High-level Conference on Gaza takes place in Jordan

The high-level conference titled “Call for Action: Urgent Humanitarian Response for Gaza” was held at Sweimeh, Jordan, on 11 June 2024. The conference was jointly organised by Jordan, Egypt and the United Nations. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and heads of other countries also attended it. Leaders called for increased aid access to Gaza and backed a US-proposed ceasefire under which Israel would withdraw from Gaza population centres and Hamas would free hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners as the viable long-term solution. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths highlighted the dire humanitarian crisis, urging significant financial support. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced US\$ 404 million in new aid for Palestinians, urging other nations to contribute more. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced US\$ 17 million in assistance and President-elect of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto pledged medical support for Gaza. Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah El Sisi blamed the humanitarian crisis on Israel, saying it was manufactured and accused Israel of using hunger as a weapon of war. Israel has denied the accusations and has put the onus on Egypt to reopen Rafah.

Blinken meets Israeli top officials

On 24 June 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant to discuss ongoing efforts aimed at securing a ceasefire in Gaza, including the release of hostages and addressing the humanitarian crisis for Palestinians. Blinken emphasised the

necessity of protecting humanitarian workers and ensuring coordinated aid distribution in Gaza alongside the United Nations. He updated Gallant on diplomatic initiatives focused on Gaza’s post-conflict security, governance and reconstruction, highlighting their importance to Israel’s security interests. Blinken also stressed the imperative of averting further escalation in the region and achieving a diplomatic resolution conducive to the return of Israeli and Lebanese families to their homes. Additionally, on 20 June 2024, Blinken met with Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi and Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer, reiterating the United States’ steadfast commitment to Israel’s security. He continued discussions on Gaza ceasefire efforts, humanitarian aid surges and post-conflict planning, emphasising the need to prevent escalation in Lebanon and facilitate a diplomatic solution for both nations.

Bahrain and Iran talk to resume bilateral ties

On 23 June 2024, Bahrain and Iran issued a joint statement agreeing to initiate talks to resume political relations. It was also discussed during a meeting between Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani and Iran’s acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani in Tehran. The meeting highlighted the historical and fraternal ties between the two nations, which have been strained since Bahrain severed ties with Iran in 2016 following attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions. This move follows the restoration of Saudi-Iran relations brokered by China last year. Bahrain’s King Hamad has emphasised the absence of current issues with Iran and the importance of normalising diplomatic, commercial and cultural relations.