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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal

A ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas, finalized on 15 January 2025 and operational from 19 January, includes a 42-day truce has been reached. Israel agreed to release 1,900 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for 33 hostages. Hamas retains 94 hostages, including 34 deceased. Israel will withdraw 700 meters inside Gaza, reduce its presence along the Philadelphi corridor, permit 600 aid trucks daily, and open the Rafah crossing allowing injured Palestinians to seek medical treatment. The second phase involves further exchanges and Israel's full withdrawal from Gaza. In the third stage, hostages' remains will be exchanged for a 3–5-year reconstruction plan under international oversight. The terms of the second and third phases remain undecided. Hamas so far has released three female hostages in exchange for 90 Palestinian women and children on 19 January and four female hostages on 25 January in exchange for 200 Palestinian prisoners. Three Israelis and five Thai nationals was released on 30 January 2025.

Situation in West Bank

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a military operation called the "Iron Wall" on 21 January 2025 in Jenin governorate and adjacent refugee camp to contain Jenin Brigades. Prior to Israeli actions, the Palestinian Authority (PA) carried out week-long raids in the Jenin refugee camp. Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz called the military action in Jenin a shift in security strategy learning from the lesson of 7 October 2023 Hamas attack. IDF actions killed 21 Palestinians, including fighters from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

Israel delays withdrawal deadline from South Lebanon

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel will not meet the 26 January 2025 withdrawal deadline from southern Lebanon under the 27 November 2024 ceasefire with Hezbollah. The IDF will continue its phased withdrawal, citing the Lebanese army's slow deployment in the region and failure to enforce its obligations under the agreement fully. The delay is also due to Hezbollah's presence and weapons caches found by the IDF in southern Lebanon, with reports suggesting that the Lebanese army has been slow to deploy. The US and France are discussing a temporary extension, and the Trump administration has backed this request, emphasising the need to prevent Hezbollah from threatening Lebanon or its neighbours. Israeli forces killed 22 people and injured 124 people in numerous locations in south Lebanon on 26 January who were trying to return to their homes after the expiry of IDF's withdrawal deadline. Lebanese leadership opposed the delay in Israeli withdrawal but eventually concurred after talks with the US to extend the deadline to 18 February 2025.

New President and Prime Minister in Lebanon

After over two years of presidential vacancy, Joseph Aoun, former Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was elected president on 9 January 2025, ending a political deadlock influenced by US and Saudi mediation. Aoun's election marks a shift in Lebanese politics, weakened Hezbollah, and regional changes, notably in Syria. President Aoun on 13 January nominated Nawaf Salam, head of the

International Court of Justice, as the prime minister after he gained the support of over half of parliament. Additionally, French President Emmanuel Macron met with President Aoun and Prime Minister Designate Nawaf Salam in Beirut on 17 January 2025 to discuss about post-ceasefire developments, economic recovery and reconstruction. On 23 January, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan met with the Lebanese partnership in efforts to rebuild the relationship, affected by Hezbollah and Iran's influence in the government undermining Riyadh's interests.

Saudi Arabia and Italy ink US\$ 10 billion deal

Italy signed agreements worth around US\$ 10 billion with Saudi Arabia, marking a significant step in their strengthened strategic partnership, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced after meeting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia, on 26 January 2025. Among the key deals, Italy's export credit agency SACE agreed to provide US\$ 3 billion in loan guarantees for Saudi Arabia's NEOM project. Additional agreements covered energy, infrastructure, defence, tourism and entertainment. Italian gas grid operator Snam partnered with ACWA Power to explore green hydrogen supply to Europe, while defence firm Leonardo signed an MoU to enhance aerospace cooperation. Meloni and bin Salman also discussed global security issues, including Ukraine, Gaza and Syria. Meloni also expressed support for Saudi Arabia's potential inclusion in the GCAP jet fighter program alongside Italy, UK and Japan.

Türkiye and Kazakhstan sign military cooperation plan for 2025

Türkiye and Kazakhstan signed a military cooperation plan for 2025 during a visit by a Kazakh delegation led by Colonel Olzhas Khussainov, head of the International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan, to Ankara. The agreement, signed by Khussainov and his Turkish counterpart Brigadier General Çatal Erdoğan, was announced by the Kazakh Defense Ministry on 27 January 2025. The document outlines joint efforts in military education, peacekeeping, combat training and medical cooperation, along with high-level exchanges between the two nations. It reflects the growing security partnership between Kazakhstan and Türkiye, strengthening defence ties and collaboration in security initiatives.

EU agrees to begin lifting sanctions on Syria

European Union foreign ministers agreed on January 27 to start lifting sanctions on Syria, with the condition that they could be reimposed if abuses occur under the country's new leadership. The EU had imposed asset freeze and travel ban on Syrian officials and entities in 2011 in response to Bashar Assad's crackdown on protesters, which led to civil war. The bloc, which had sanctioned 316 individuals and 86 entities linked to Assad, aims to ease restrictions if Syria pursues an inclusive political transition without extremism or influence from Russia and Iran. EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas stated that a "roadmap" had been approved to lift measures hindering Syria's reconstruction, though technical details remain. She

clarified that while a political agreement was reached, the process of easing sanctions would require further discussions in the coming weeks.

Jaishankar visits Qatar and the UAE

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar paid an official visit to Qatar from 30 December 2024 to 1 January 2025, where he met Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani. During the visit, both sides reviewed key aspects of bilateral relations, including political ties, trade, investment, energy cooperation, security, cultural exchanges and people-to-people connections. Discussions also covered recent regional and international issues of mutual interest, reflecting the deepening partnership between India and Qatar. Additionally, Dr. S. Jaishankar officially visited the UAE from 27-29 January 2025, where he met with the Emirati leadership to review and enhance the strategic partnership between the two nations. The visit focused on expanding cooperation in trade, investment, energy and regional security. Dr. Jaishankar also delivered the keynote address at the inaugural session of Raisina Middle East in Abu Dhabi, highlighting India's vision for engagement in the region. The visit reinforced the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and added fresh momentum to India-UAE relations, underscoring the shared commitment to deeper collaboration across multiple sectors.

Russia's deputy foreign minister visits Damascus

A Russian delegation led by Mikhail Bogdanov, special presidential envoy for

the Middle East and Africa and deputy Foreign Minister and Alexander Lavrentyev, special presidential envoy for Syria, visited Damascus on 28 January 2025. This marks the first official Russian visit since Bashar Al Assad stepped down as Syrian president in December 2024 and left the country. Russia, which had long supported Assad militarily, seeks to retain its strategic foothold in Syria, particularly its naval facility in Tartous and the Hmeimim air base near Latakia. The Tartous base remains Moscow's only Mediterranean repair and replenishment hub, while Syria has served as a key transit point for Russian military contractors operating in Africa. The visit underscores Russia's efforts to maintain influence in Syria's evolving political and security landscape.

UK and Iraq sign US\$ 15 billion trade and investment deal

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani visited London on 14 January 2025 and met with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer. The leaders signed a landmark Partnership & Cooperation Agreement (PCA), a wide-ranging treaty on trade and strategic cooperation, marking a "new era" in bilateral ties. The US\$ 15 billion deal includes UK-led infrastructure projects, such as mine removal, water desalination in Basra, and interconnecting the Iraqi and Saudi power grids. Discussions also covered security cooperation, migration policies and border enforcement, with both nations pledging to combat people-smuggling networks.