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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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India hosts 2nd India–Arab Foreign Ministers’ meeting

India hosted the 2nd India–Arab Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (IAFMM) in New Delhi on 31 January 2026, co-chaired with the UAE, with participation from Foreign Ministers of Arab League member states and the Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit. The meeting was held after a decade, following the inaugural session in Bahrain in 2016, and aimed to build on cooperation across priority areas, including economy, energy, education, media, and culture. As the highest institutional mechanism guiding India–Arab engagement, the IAFMM reviewed progress under the India–Arab dialogue framework formalised in 2002 and strengthened through the Arab–India Cooperation Forum. The meeting marked the first time India hosted the forum and saw participation from all 22 Arab countries, following the 4th India–Arab Senior Officials’ Meeting held on 30 January 2026.

US unveils Board of Peace on Gaza

The US President Donald Trump unveiled the “Board of Peace” at the World Economic Forum in Davos, presenting it as an international mechanism to sustain the Israel– Hamas ceasefire and shape Gaza’s political and economic future. The Trump administration claims 59 signatories, though only 19 states attended, with major European powers absent over concerns about the board’s legal mandate, its potential to rival the UN, and Trump’s role as chairman for life. The initiative features a three-tier structure: the Board of Peace as the supreme council; the Gaza Executive Board (GEB), to oversee reconstruction, security, and disarmament; and the technocratic National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) to manage

civilian services. Plans include reopening the Rafah Crossing, linking phased reconstruction to Hamas’ disarmament, and mobilising international investment. Israel has cautiously engaged, objecting to Türkiye and Qatar’s roles, insisting on full demilitarisation, and navigating internal opposition from far-right ministers. Among the West Asian and North African states, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Türkiye, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco and Israel have joined the Board of Peace.

USS Abraham Lincoln reaches Gulf

US President Donald Trump issued a renewed warning to Iran that any future American strike would be “far worse” unless Tehran returns to the negotiating table and accepts a deal barring nuclear weapons. His message coincided with reports that the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group reached the West Asian region signalling Washington’s readiness to project power and deter Iranian retaliation. US Central Command stated that the strike group accompanied by three destroyers, USS Frank E. Petersen Jr., USS Spruance, USS Michael Murphy and surveillance aircraft is deployed to promote regional security and stability. Iran’s army chief, Amir Hatami vowed a “crushing response” to any attack. Iran’s mission to UN emphasised that if pushed, it is ready to defend itself and respond while maintaining that they remain open to a fair and equitable nuclear agreement.

UAE President visits India

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan paid an official visit to India on 19 January 2026. The visit built on recent high-level exchanges and reaffirmed the depth of India–UAE ties across trade, energy, defence, technology, and people-to-people links. Both leaders reviewed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and

agreed to expand cooperation in defence, space, food security, AI, nuclear energy, and infrastructure. Key outcomes included Letter of Intents on defence partnership, space industry collaboration, and UAE investment in Gujarat's Dholera Special Investment Region; a long-term LNG supply agreement between Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company Gas for 10 years from 2028; and an MoU on food safety and technical requirements. The two sides agreed to target over US\$200 billion in bilateral trade by 2032 and announced initiatives spanning supercomputing, digital embassies, GIFT City presence, cultural cooperation, and youth exchanges.

Qatar hosts GCC-US Joint Security Exercise

Qatar hosted the fourth edition of the Arabian Gulf Security exercise, bringing together security forces from all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and specialised US units in a large-scale joint drill aimed at enhancing readiness and operational co-ordination. The exercise, which began on 26 January 2026 and was scheduled to run until 4 February 2026, featured more than 70 simulated scenarios and over 260 hours of intensive field training. The drills focused on testing response plans across multiple security domains, improving interoperability, and exchanging expertise among participating forces. The Exercise took place amid heightened regional tensions and followed recent GCC initiatives, including the discussions on establishing a joint defensive air shield.

Nouri Al Maliki nominated as next Prime Minister of Iraq

The Shiite alliance holding the largest bloc in Iraq's parliament nominated former prime minister Nouri Al Maliki to lead the

next government. The Coordination Framework said the nomination was based on Al Maliki's political and administrative experience and pledged commitment to the constitutional process, governance reforms, and safeguarding Iraq's unity and security. Al Maliki, who served as prime minister from 2006 to 2014, was backed after incumbent prime minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani withdrew his bid for a second term despite his coalition winning the most seats in the November election but falling short of a majority. Al Maliki's State of Law bloc placed second. The nomination drew criticism from US President Donald Trump, who warned that Washington would withdraw support if Al Maliki returned to power.

Gulf Shield 2026 Military Exercise takes place in Saudi Arabia

From 4 to 9 January 2026, the joint Gulf military exercise "Gulf Shield 2026" was conducted in Saudi Arabia with the participation of the UAE, amid heightened tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi over developments in Yemen. The drill involved air force and air defence units from all six GCC members, along with the GCC Unified Military Command, and focused on strengthening regional defence co-operation and enhancing combat readiness. According to Saudi and Emirati defence authorities, the exercise featured advanced operational scenarios, including simulations of complex aerial and missile threats, joint air manoeuvres, and integrated field exercises to improve coordination in a joint operational environment. The exercise took place days after Saudi Arabia accused the UAE of backing rival forces in Yemen's eastern provinces, allegations rejected by Abu Dhabi, which later announced the withdrawal of its remaining troops from the country.

Syrian Government, Kurdish-led SDF reach integration deal

On 30 January 2026, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) agreed to a comprehensive ceasefire and a phased integration of their military and administrative structures into the Syrian state. Under the agreement, the SDF will withdraw from front lines, then, Syrian Interior Ministry forces will enter the northeastern cities of Hassakeh and Qamishli, after which the integration process will begin. The deal provided for the creation of a new military formation comprising three SDF brigades, the incorporation of an SDF brigade into a government unit in Aleppo province, and the integration of local institutions and employees into state bodies. It also included guarantees on civil and educational rights for Kurds and the return of displaced persons. The agreement followed clashes in January 2026, in which government forces recaptured most territory the SDF had controlled in northeastern Syria for over a decade.

Leaders of Syria, UAE and Palestine visit Moscow

Syrian President Ahmed Al Sharaa met Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on 28 January 2026 during a working visit to Russia, where talks focused on the state and future of bilateral relations and the broader situation in West Asia. Putin expressed Russia's readiness to support Syria's reconstruction, particularly in construction and humanitarian sectors, and reiterated Moscow's support for Syria's territorial integrity, citing progress including integration of areas east of the Euphrates.

On 29 January 2026, the UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan held talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in

Moscow. The discussion focused primarily on Russia-UAE bilateral cooperation, current situation in West Asia and covered a broad range of issues. They also discussed about the upcoming second meeting of Russian, American, and Ukrainian representatives in Abu Dhabi under the mediation of the Emirati authorities.

Earlier, on 22 January 2026, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Moscow and discussed Gaza's post-war governance, reconstruction, and the broader future of the Palestinian state with Putin. Abbas reiterated his firm rejection of any attempts to displace Palestinians from their land and emphasised that Gaza and the West Bank must remain a single, unified territorial and administrative unit under the central authority of the Palestinian Authority. Putin underscored Russia's "principled" support for Palestinian statehood.

Libya signs US\$20 billion oil development deal with France and US

Libya signed a 25-year oil development agreement with France's TotalEnergies and US-based ConocoPhillips involving more than US\$20 billion in foreign-financed investment. The deal aims to raise production capacity by up to 850,000 barrels per day and is expected to generate net revenues exceeding US\$376 billion. Waha, a subsidiary of Libya's state-run National Oil Corporation, currently produced between 340,000 and 400,000 bpd and operated five major oil and gas fields linked to the Sidra terminal. On the sidelines of the Libya Energy and Economy Summit in Tripoli, the government also signed an MoU with Chevron and a cooperation agreement with Egypt's oil ministry. Officials said the agreements signalled deeper engagement with major international energy partners despite Libya's prolonged political instability.