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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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US expedites US\$ 4 billion military aid to Israel

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced on 1 March 2025 that he had invoked emergency authorities to accelerate the delivery of approximately US\$ 4 billion in military assistance to Israel. The move reverses the Biden Administration's partial arms embargo and underscores President Trump's commitment to supporting Israel. Since taking office, the Trump Administration has approved nearly US\$ 12 billion in Foreign Military Sales to Israel. The decision aligns with Trump's repeal of a Biden-era memorandum that had imposed conditions on military aid, which Rubio criticised as politicised and harmful during Israel's conflict against Iran and its proxies. The administration reaffirmed its dedication to Israel's security, pledging to employ all available measures to counter threats. This expedited assistance highlights the strategic partnership between the US and Israel amid ongoing regional tensions.

Syria's interim government reaches agreement with SDF

Syria's interim government announced an important agreement on 10 March 2025 to integrate Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into state institutions, aiming to unify the country after years of civil war. The agreement follows the country's deadliest violence since Assad's fall last year, with over 700 killed in recent clashes. Interim President Ahmad Al Sharaa has called on all armed groups to integrate into the national army, rejecting the SDF's demand for special military units. The deal formally recognises Syria's Kurdish community, granting citizenship to

thousands previously denied under Assad's rule. SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi hailed the agreement as a step toward a more inclusive Syria. The eight-point accord outlines participation in state institutions based on competence, marking a major political breakthrough in Syria's post-war reconstruction efforts. The United States conveyed its support for a political transition that demonstrates credible, non-sectarian governance as the best path to avoid further conflict.

Senior ISIS terrorist neutralised in Iraq

US Central Command (CENTCOM) forces, in coordination with Iraqi Intelligence, killed ISIS' second-in-command and chief of global operations, Abdallah Makki Muslih Al Rifai, alias 'Abu Khadijah', in a precision airstrike in Iraq's Al Anbar province on 13 March 2025. Abu Khadijah, who oversaw ISIS operations, logistics, and finances, was found dead alongside another operative, both wearing unexploded suicide vests. Earlier, on 6 March, SDF, supported by CENTCOM, captured ISIS cell leader Salah Mohammad Al Abdullah in Shahil, Syria. The strikes mark a significant blow to ISIS' operational structure. Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla emphasised that such operations would continue to safeguard US, allied, and partner forces in the region.

US designates Ansarallah as a FTO

The US Department of State officially designated Ansarallah, also known as the Houthis, as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) on 4 March 2025, fulfilling one of President Trump's key promises. Secretary of State Marco Rubio cited the group's attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, as

well as on the US service members and regional allies. The designation follows Executive Order 14175, which highlights the Houthis' threat to American security, global trade, and regional stability. The US also warned against countries engaging with the Houthis under the guise of legitimate business. The move aims to curb financial and logistical support for the group. Additionally, the State Department's Rewards for Justice program announced a US\$ 15 million bounty for information disrupting the Houthis' financial networks. Additionally, on 5 March, the US sanctioned seven senior members of Ansarallah for their role in smuggling weapons to Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen and negotiating weapons procurement deals.

Protests erupt in Turkiye over CHP leader Imamoglu's arrest

Mass protests have been taking place in Turkiye for almost a week after Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu was arrested on corruption charges on 19 March 2025, a move widely seen as politically motivated. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) denounced the charges, calling them an attempt to eliminate President Erdogan's most formidable rival ahead of the 2028 presidential elections. While Erdogan dismissed the allegations of political interference, he accused the opposition of inciting unrest. The protests, largely led by young demonstrators, saw over 1,100 arrests as security forces used water cannons and pepper spray to disperse crowds. Imamoglu was formally charged with bribery, extortion and tender manipulation; and Istanbul University revoked his degree, potentially disqualifying him from running for

president. The CHP ended its rallies but pledged to fight for his release. As Turkiye faces its most significant civil unrest since the Gezi Park protests of 2013, concerns over democratic backsliding and Erdogan's future political ambitions continue to mount.

Arab League approves Egypt's reconstruction plan for Gaza

On 4 March 2025, the Arab League adopted Egypt's proposed reconstruction plan for the Gaza Strip, aimed at redevelopment and rehabilitation without displacing the Palestinian population. The emergency summit took place amid uncertainty surrounding the impasse between Israel and Hamas over Phase Two of the ceasefire deal and following US President Donald Trump's plans to bring Gaza under American control and relocate its residents elsewhere. The Egyptian plan, with an estimated cost of US\$ 53 billion, envisions the construction of a smart city powered by renewable energy, fostering a sustainable economy and long-term employment in sectors such as industry, agriculture, fishing, tourism, and technology. Potential financial sources include the UN, financial institutions, donor states, development banks, foreign direct investment, and private partnerships. The plan outlines training for Palestinian forces by Egypt and Jordan; and ceasefire preservation and governance under non-partisan technocratic Gaza Administration Committee for six months facilitating Palestinian Authority's return in Gaza Strip. The US deemed the plan as inadequate and Israel rejected the plan for failing to sufficiently address its security concerns including absence of clear mechanism for Hamas' transition out of

power, continued military capabilities and the possibility for Hamas to exert influence over the proposed technocratic government.

Israeli strikes in Gaza resume

Following the culmination of a 42-day truce on 1 March 2025 under Phase One of the ceasefire, Hamas and Israel reached an impasse over the terms of the second phase. While Israel sought to extend the first phase to allow for further hostage and prisoner exchanges, Hamas insisted on adhering to the original ceasefire terms while continuing negotiations for the second phase. US Middle East Envoy Steve Witkoff proposed a bridge deal to release hostages and Palestinian prisoners and extend the ceasefire through Ramadan and Passover until 19 April reached a deadlock. Israel, after putting pressure such as aid blockade and electricity cuts, re-launched air strikes on 18 March and resumed ground operations. Hamas retaliated by launching rockets at multiple locations inside Israeli territory. Meanwhile, the death toll in Gaza has surpassed 50,000 following the latest escalation.

Israel's strikes in Lebanon and Syria

In the largest escalation since the 27 November 2024 ceasefire, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) carried out strikes across Lebanon on 22 March 2025, targeting over 50 Hezbollah sites and killing seven people. IDF's strikes were in response to rocket attacks on northern Israel. Hezbollah has denied any involvement, insisting that it remains committed to the ceasefire. Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz held the Lebanese government responsible for preventing provocation from its territory. Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam warned that Israel's actions in southern Lebanon risk "dragging the country into a

new war, which will bring woes to Lebanon and the Lebanese people." In Syria, the IDF conducted multiple airstrikes on 8 and 11 March, targeting military assets, weapons depots, and infrastructure, including radar and aerial intelligence installations. On 18 March, IDF airstrikes in Daraa province killed three civilians and injured 19 others while targeting military assets. In an official statement, the IDF described these installations in southern Syria as a security threat to Israel. On 19 March, in its largest incursion into Syria since occupying parts of southern Syria, the IDF advanced around 50 armored vehicles into Al Adnaniyah village in Quneitra province, raising concerns over potential forced displacement.

Developments in Israel

In a political win for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the US\$ 206 billion budget was passed with 66 votes in favour and 52 against. The votes came ahead of the 31 March deadline, after which the government would have collapsed if the budget had not been approved. The opposition parties have criticised the budget, citing increases in water, electricity and property taxes, as well as hikes in VAT and National Insurance payments. Meanwhile, on 20 March, the Israeli security cabinet removed Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar, and on 23 March, it passed a no-confidence motion against Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, both of whom had been vocal critics of Netanyahu's war strategy and domestic policies. The removal of Ronen Bar has been temporarily stayed by the Supreme Court. The Knesset on 27 March passed the controversial judicial appointments law granting political authorities greater control over appointment of judges.