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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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US forces exit Iraq after two decades

US forces withdrew from their last bases in Iraq on 30 September 2026, ending a military presence that had lasted more than two decades and claimed the lives of about 4,500 Americans. The withdrawal, agreed in 2024 under President Joe Biden and implemented by Donald Trump's administration, was celebrated by Iran and its allied groups as a victory. Iraqi security experts warned that the departure could increase Tehran's influence through Iran-backed militias and create space for the Islamic State to regroup. Iraq had maintained close political and military ties with both Washington and Tehran, while also serving at times as a proxy battlefield. Security officials said reduced US intelligence, logistical assistance and drone support could weaken efforts against the Islamic State.

US proposes US\$5 billion fund to rebuild Gulf energy infrastructure

The Trump administration has proposed investing US\$5 billion in a new fund to help the Gulf countries rebuild energy infrastructure damaged during the Iran war and reduce their dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for oil and gas shipments. Separately, on 31 August 2026, the United States approved a possible US\$800 million foreign military sale to Iraq involving Bell 412EPX and Bell 407M helicopters, along with related equipment. The proposed package included GAU-19 machine guns, rocket systems, electro-optical/infrared sensors, missile launch detection systems, radios, spare parts and ground-support equipment. It also covered pilot and maintenance training, as well as US government and contractor engineering, technical and logistical support. The State

Department said that the sale would strengthen Iraq's security capabilities and improve its capacity for rotary-wing transport, reconnaissance and air-to-surface targeting.

India-GCC Troika Ministerial Meeting takes place in New York

India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held a Troika Ministerial Meeting in New York on 25 September 2026, on the margins of the 81st session of the UN General Assembly, with India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar leading the Indian delegation. The participants reviewed progress under the India-GCC Joint Action Plan 2024–2028 and welcomed the launch of negotiations for the India-GCC Free Trade Agreement following the finalisation of the Terms of Reference in February 2026. They discussed cooperation in trade, investment, energy, health, technology, food security, culture and education, with bilateral trade reaching US\$178.66 billion in FY 2025–26. Both sides also discussed regional security, commercial shipping, terrorism, multilateral reform, and agreed to convene the second India-GCC Joint Ministerial Meeting for Strategic Dialogue at an early date.

Benjamin Netanyahu visits UAE

On 27 September 2026, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the UAE and met with President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. Discussions reportedly focused on bilateral relations, regional challenges and Iran, an area of growing security cooperation between the two states. The visit occurred amid heightened controversy over reports that Sheikh Mohammed had

warned Netanyahu of a possible major Hamas operation before the 7 October 2023 attack. Netanyahu has denied receiving any such warning and dismissed the reports as fabricated, while the UAE has declined to comment on specific conversations but reaffirmed continued intelligence cooperation. The meeting also underscored the importance of the 2020 Abraham Accords, which established formal Israel–UAE relations and have since expanded into security cooperation. The visit prior to Israel’s October elections, also carried significant domestic political significance amid renewed scrutiny of Netanyahu’s handling of the pre-October 7 warnings.

Saudi Arabia announces uranium-bearing ore discovery

Saudi Arabia has announced the discovery of an estimated 110 million tonnes of uranium-bearing ore in the Medina region, as it advances plans to develop nuclear power and diversify its energy mix. Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman announced the estimate at the IAEA’s 70th General Conference in Vienna, noting that Saudi Arabia is continuing uranium exploration and examining uranium recovery as a byproduct of fertiliser production. Geological studies reportedly identified ore with high concentrations of rare-earth elements, particularly heavy rare-earth elements, along with uranium. The discovery could support Saudi efforts to develop domestic nuclear fuel capabilities, although the quantity of recoverable uranium and the deposit’s commercial viability remain uncertain and would depend on factors such as uranium concentration, recovery rates, and extraction costs.

Iraq’s Kurdistan Region unifies Peshmerga forces

Iraq’s Kurdistan Region formally unified its Peshmerga forces on 21 September 2026, ending a division that had persisted for more than three decades between the KDP-affiliated Unit 80 and the PUK-affiliated Unit 70. The move, announced at a ceremony in Erbil attended by Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and senior Kurdish, Iraqi and international officials, follows years of reform efforts supported by the US, Britain, Germany and other members of the international coalition. Under the new arrangement, all Peshmerga forces are to operate under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, with reforms extending to training, promotions, duties and military doctrine. Barzani said the unified force should rise above partisan interests and strengthen coordination with Iraq’s federal security forces, while Kurdish officials viewed the move as a potential step towards greater political rapprochement between the KDP and PUK.

Xi Jinping visits Egypt

China’s President Xi Jinping visited Egypt on 1-3 September 2026 coinciding with the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations. The two sides signed 25 bilateral agreements covering economic, trade, technology, infrastructure, security and military cooperation. Key agreements included linking Egypt’s Vision 2030 with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, expanding the China–Egypt TEDA industrial zone in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, and promoting greater bilateral trade through local currencies to reduce dependence on the US dollar. The two countries also agreed to deepen cooperation in AI, transport, manufacturing and other emerging technologies. Defence ties were

reinforced following joint air-force exercises involving Chinese J-16 and Egyptian Rafale aircraft. Diplomatically, Egypt supports the One-China principle, while China recognises Egypt's Nile water-security rights and interests.

Saudi Crown Prince's visit to Egypt

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, accompanied by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and other senior officials visited Egypt on 15 September 2026. The two sides reached a preliminary agreement for more than US\$10 billion in new Saudi investments in renewable energy, petroleum, logistics, food security, tourism, infrastructure and real estate. They also agreed to renew Saudi Arabia's US\$5.3 billion deposit with the Central Bank of Egypt, providing crucial foreign-exchange support ahead of debt repayments. Saudi investments in Egypt between 2022 and 2025 was at US\$4.2 billion. Both countries agreed to increase bilateral trade by at least 20 per cent in 2027, compared with average trade during the previous two years. Cooperation also intends to encourage Saudi private sector investment and expedite projects in tourism, clean energy, logistics, ports and real estate.

Strait of Hormuz continues to remain tense

In September 2026, the Strait of Hormuz remained the central maritime flashpoint of the US–Iran war, with escalating confrontation between Iranian and US naval forces. On 5 September, US forces reportedly struck three Iranian oil tankers, followed by Iranian attacks on commercial and US-linked vessels. On 8 September, an Iranian missile attack targeted a US Navy warship, which evaded the missiles. On 14

September, an Iranian anti-ship missile struck a maritime vessel carrying US Marines, injuring eight personnel. Following a brief diplomatic lull, the Kuwaiti VLCC Al Funtas was struck by an Iranian projectile on 28–29 September, causing a fire. Despite the escalation, regional oil flows through Hormuz recovered to 12.8 million barrels per day in September, supported by US-escorted shuttle operations. Notably, Iran proposed a seven-day roadmap to reopen the Strait in exchange for lifting the US naval blockade, but President Trump rejected the proposal.

Tension in the Bab al-Mandeb

In September 2026, the Yemen conflict intensified alongside the wider US–Iran war, threatening the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and regional energy routes. On 10 September, Houthi forces captured the strategic Red Sea port of Mocha, expanding their control along Yemen's western coast and threatening the Bab al-Mandeb shipping corridor. The same day, Houthi forces reportedly advanced towards the Hanish Islands, while Perim Island, located within the Bab al-Mandeb, was reportedly seized on 11 September. Control of these islands could provide advantageous positions for monitoring or threatening maritime traffic. The escalation coincided with an attack on Saudi Arabia's East–West oil pipeline on 11 September, reportedly involving drones launched from Iraq, prompting a temporary shutdown and disrupting an important alternative route to the Strait of Hormuz. The developments increased pressure on Saudi Arabia, Egypt and international shipping, as instability simultaneously affected the Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb chokepoints, raising wider concerns over energy security and maritime trade.