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मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

# WEST ASIA DIGEST

*Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia*

- **Prime Minister Modi visits Kuwait**
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### **Prime Minister Modi visits Kuwait**

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi held extensive discussions with Kuwaiti leaders during his historic visit to Kuwait, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 43 years. He met with Sheikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait and other senior leadership in the country and discussed strengthening the India-Kuwait strategic partnership in multiple areas, including political, trade, investment, energy, defence, security, health, education, technology, cultural and people-to-people ties. A MoU on Defence cooperation was signed between the two countries. Besides, an Executive Programme on Cooperation in the Field of Sports, a Cultural Exchange Programme and a Framework Agreement on Kuwait joining the International Solar Alliance were also signed during the visit. Prime Minister Modi highlighted opportunities in energy, food, defence and pharma sectors and invited Kuwaiti investors to India. A Joint Commission for Cooperation (JCC) was signed to establish Joint Working Groups (JWGs) in the areas of trade, investment, education, technology, agriculture, security and culture in addition to the existing JWGs on Health, Manpower and Hydrocarbons. The Amir of Kuwait conferred the Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer, Kuwait's highest national honour, on Prime Minister Modi.

### **Assad flees to Moscow as rebels take over Damascus**

The situation in Syria remains tense as President Bashar Al Assad fled to Moscow as the rebel military offensive intensified. Abu Mohammed Al Joulani, who now goes by his real name, Ahmed Al Sharaa, has

become Syria's new de facto leader. Mohammed Al Bashir, who headed the Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS)-led de facto government in Idlib, was announced as Syria's caretaker Prime Minister who will lead a transitional Syrian government until 1 March 2025. In an effort to manage the differences among the various armed groups, Ahmad Al Sharaa reached an agreement with former opposition military factions and they have agreed to unify them under the defence ministry. He has stated that the lifting of international sanctions is essential for rebuilding Syria.

### **Israel's military operations in Syria**

On 8 December 2024, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the capture of a demilitarised buffer zone in the Golan Heights, citing that the 1974 disengagement agreement with Syria had "collapsed" following HTS' takeover of Syria. Israel seized the Mount Hermon, which is Syria's highest mountain peak. On 9-10 December, the Israeli military carried out about 480 strikes across Syria, hitting most of Syria's strategic weapon stockpiles and military infrastructure. Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said that Israel was bombing Syrian military facilities housing chemical weapons stocks and long-range missiles to prevent them from falling "into the hands of extremists." On 17 December, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, while on a security tour of the Golan Heights, stated that Israel would stay in the buffer zone until another arrangement was found that would ensure Israel's security.

### **Israel-Houthi conflict intensifies**

The conflict between Israel and the Houthis intensified in December 2024. On 19

December, a Houthi missile damaged a school in Ramat Gan, Israel. Israel responded with extensive airstrikes on Hodeidah, Sana'a and the Ras Isa oil terminal, targeting ports, power stations and military infrastructure. On 26 December, the IAF struck key Houthi sites, including Sana'a International Airport and coastal ports, citing their use for Iranian weapon smuggling and hosting Iranian officials. In retaliation, the Houthis launched missiles and drones targeting Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv and a ship in the Arabian Sea. Israel accused the Houthis of using civilian infrastructure for military purposes, while the Houthis pledged continued resistance against Israel.

#### **45<sup>th</sup> GCC Summit takes place in Kuwait**

The 45<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held in Kuwait condemned the situation in Gaza, West Bank and Lebanon and highlighted an urgent need for intervention in aid of civilians and cessation of conflict. The GCC leaders reiterated on having negotiations to achieve a permanent resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Kuwait Declaration, issued at the end of the GCC Summit, held that the role played by the GCC member states in addressing political and economic challenges at a regional and global level was commendable. Further, emphasis was placed on promoting sustainable economic diversification, advancing digital transformation, stabilising energy markets and addressing climate change.

#### **Jaishankar visits Bahrain and Qatar**

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Qatar on 6 December 2024 and took part in the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Doha Forum,

where he spoke about the effects of the ongoing conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine on regional shipping and trade while underscoring that there is a need for greater participatory diplomacy. He met the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, to discuss ways of further enhancing bilateral relations with Qatar. Subsequently, Jaishankar visited Bahrain from 7-9 December 2024, where he co-chaired the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the India-Bahrain High Joint Commission (HJC) with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani. At the meeting, both sides reviewed the bilateral relations across multiple sectors, including trade, investments, healthcare, energy, security, tourism and people-to-people ties. Additionally, new areas of cooperation, such as space, education, fintech, and technology, were discussed. Dr Jaishankar also spoke at the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the IISS Manama Dialogue and paid a visit to the 200-year-old Shreenathji Temple in Manama.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> India-UAE Strategic Dialogue**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Strategic Dialogue and the 15<sup>th</sup> India-UAE Joint Commission Meeting between India and the UAE was held in New Delhi. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister led the Emirati delegation. He also met with Prime Minister Modi and both leaders emphasised advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, particularly in the fields of technology, energy and people-to-people connections. Prime Minister Modi expressed satisfaction over recent high-level visits, including the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi's September

2024 visit to India. Modi highlighted the importance of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), calling it a transformative initiative to enhance regional connectivity and prosperity. They also discussed on the situation in West Asia, with Modi reiterating India's commitment to long-term peace, security and stability in the region.

### **Joint Oman-Saudi military exercise 'Solidarity 1' takes place in Saudi Arabia**

The Omani-Saudi Joint Military Exercise "Solidarity 1" took place from 16-26 December 2024 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The exercise involved the Oman Coast Regiment of the 23rd Infantry Brigade, Royal Army of Oman (RAO) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade of Saudi Arabia's Royal Land Forces. Conducted as part of RAO's training programme, the exercise aimed to enhance combat readiness and operational performance. It also aligned with the annual training framework fostering cooperation with GCC, Arab and friendly nations to achieve broader national objectives. It underscores Oman and Saudi Arabia's commitment to strengthening defence collaboration with each other.

### **US approves US\$ 300 million military maintenance sale to Kuwait**

The US State Department has approved a potential Foreign Military Sale to Kuwait for Maintenance Repair Sustainment Capability and related equipment, valued at US\$ 300 million. The Defence Security Cooperation Agency has notified Congress of this decision. The sale includes refurbishing Kuwait's maintenance facilities and providing tools, equipment,

spare parts and personnel support. It encompasses two years of initial repair parts, specialised repair capabilities for small/medium arms, advanced AGT1500 engine repairs and support for Abrams tanks, recovery vehicles and personnel carriers. The package also includes five years of operational and maintenance support. This initiative aims to bolster the Kuwait Land Forces' operational readiness, enabling effective maintenance of its armoured fleet and ensuring preparedness against current and future threats.

### **Saudi Arabia unveils National Red Sea Sustainability Strategy**

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has launched Saudi Arabia's National Red Sea Sustainability Strategy to protect the Red Sea, empower communities and transition to a blue economy in line with Vision 2030 and national priorities for research, development and innovation (RDI). The strategy positions the Red Sea region as a global benchmark for sustainable blue economy activities and reinforces the Kingdom's commitment to environmental conservation and economic diversification. Key objectives of the strategy include expanding marine and coastal protected areas from 3 per cent to 30 per cent, increasing renewable energy's contribution to 50 per cent of the energy mix by 2030, creating jobs in blue economy sectors and safeguarding investments in coastal tourism, fisheries and ecotourism. Structured around five pillars—Environmental Sustainability, Economic Development, Social Development, Safety and Security and Governance—the strategy outlines 48 initiatives to align economic growth with environmental preservation.