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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Reconciliation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The unity of the GCC was restored at the 41st Annual GCC Summit held at Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia, on January 5, 2021. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain along with Egypt ended the isolation of Qatar and restored diplomatic ties with Qatar. They also announced the opening of their air space, land and sea borders, which were closed after the announcement of the boycott of Qatar in June 2017. At the Al-Ula Summit, the GCC countries agreed to work as a single, unified economic and political group for achieving security, peace and stability in the region. The US, Kuwait and Oman have played a key role in the reconciliation. Meanwhile, Egypt has also agreed to resume diplomatic contacts with Qatar. Emphasising the principle of collective security against emerging challenges, the Al-Ula Declaration calls for further integrating the militaries of member countries under the supervision of the Joint Defense Council – the Supreme Military Committee – the unified military leadership of the GCC. Highlighting the importance of deepening economic integration, the Al-Ula Declaration called for completing the requirements for the Gulf Customs Union and the Common Gulf Market.

US designates the UAE and Bahrain as ‘Major Security Partners’

Recognising the exceptional security partnership, the US designated the UAE and Bahrain as its ‘major security partners.’ The UAE and Bahrain host thousands of the US soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. The US has three military bases in the UAE: Al-Dhafra Air Base, Al Minhad Air Base, and the Fujairah Naval Base. Bahrain is also a major non-NATO ally of the US, and apart from being headquarters to Central Command of the US Naval Forces, it is also home to the headquarters of the US Navy’s

Fifth Fleet. Both the UAE and Bahrain have participated in numerous US-led coalitions over the past 30 years.

US designates the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO)

The US Department of State declared Yemen’s Houthi rebels as a “Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO)” for their acts of terrorism, including cross-border attacks that have threatened civilian populations, infrastructure, and commercial shipping. Mike Pompeo, then Secretary of State, had stated that he intends to list three-leaders of the Houthis – Abdullah Yehya Al Hakim, Abdul Malik Al Houthi and Abd Al Khaliw Badr Al Din Al Houthi – as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).” The move has the potential to complicate the peace talks in the country and the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people. The Houthis have stated that they will not let the terrorist designation undermine the peace process.

Saudi Arabia announces a Five-Year Strategy for its Economy

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched a new Five-Year Strategy (2021-25) for the Kingdom’s sovereign wealth fund as aiming towards economic diversification as part of the Vision 2030. The role of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) will be significant in the next years as Saudi Arabia intends to put in US\$ 40 billion a year into the local economy, double its assets to US\$ 1.07 trillion, contribute US\$ 320 billion to non-oil GDP, and create 1.8 million jobs by 2025. The new strategy will focus on strengthening new sectors, empowering the private sector, developing the PIF’s portfolio, achieving effective long-term investments, supporting the localisation of labour markets and building strategic economic partnerships.

Iran Tests New Long-Range Ballistic Missile in the Indian Ocean

The Iranian military tested new long-range (1,800 kms) ballistic missiles in the Indian Ocean. According to the Islamic Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, the main purpose is “to be able to hit the enemy’s warships, including aircraft carriers and battle cruisers.” Earlier, in January, Iran had conducted drills for testing short-range missiles in the Gulf of Oman, featuring a wide array of domestically produced drones. Iran has one of the biggest missile programmes in the region. Lately, Iran has boosted its stronghold in the Persian Gulf waterways, it sends ships to operate outside the Strait of Hormuz and is trying to control Bab El-Mandab through the Houthis in Yemen. The head of the IRGC Navy, Alireza Tangsiri, announced that it will build a permanent base in the Indian Ocean by March 2021.

US moves Israel from European Command to Central Command

The US Department of Defence (DoD) has decided to move Israel from the US European Command (EUCOM) to Central Command (CENTCOM). According to the statement issued by DoD, the decision was part of changes made under the Unified Command Plans (UCP). DoD reviews the UCP biennially, and restructures it according to the change in operational environments. The Central Command was established in 1983 by the Reagan Administration. However, Israel was not included in the CENTCOM, at the time due to its non-recognition by the Arab states, except for Egypt. The DoD has stated that the decision was an outcome of changed geopolitical situations in West Asia. Israel’s normalisation of relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, has

provided a strategic opportunity for the US to join hands with key partners in West Asia against the common threats.

Palestine to hold Parliamentary and Presidential Elections in May and July 2021

On 15 January, 2021, a decree issued by the Office of President Mahmoud Abbas declared that the Palestinian Authority (PA) will hold legislative elections in East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on May 22, 2021, and Presidential elections on July 31, 2021. The last elections were held nearly fifteen years ago, in 2006. The announcement was welcomed by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres who said that the holding of elections “will be a crucial step towards Palestinian unity.” Hamas has also responded positively to the announcement.

MoS MEA, Shri V. Muraleedharan, visits UAE

Shri V. Muraleedharan, MoS MEA, undertook a three-day visit to the UAE from January 19-21, 2021, and held meetings with the UAE dignitaries on various bilateral and international issues of mutual interest. Shri Muraleedharan met his UAE counterpart and the two countries agreed on expanding the comprehensive strategic partnership in trade, investment, connectivity, IT, space and welfare of the Indian community. During the visit, he inaugurated the Indian government’s first ‘upskilling and training centre’ for blue-collar workers in the UAE, as well as, held talks with a broad section of the Indian community residing in the UAE. He stated that nearly 1.3 million non-resident Indians (NRIs) returned from the UAE to India since the start of the *Vande Bharat Mission*, wherein, 1.15 million of these NRIs have already returned to the Emirates.