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# WEST ASIA DIGEST

*Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia*

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## **Violent clashes erupt between Israel and Hamas**

Israel and Hamas engaged in violent clashes after the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) raided the Al Aqsa Mosque to disperse the Palestinian demonstrators gathered to protest the pending case in the Israeli Supreme Court to evict 13 Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah locality in East Jerusalem. Hamas gave an ultimatum to Israel to withdraw its soldiers from the Al Aqsa Mosque and stop the eviction from Sheikh Jarrah by May 10 after which it targeted Israeli cities with a barrage of rockets from the Gaza Strip. In response to the rocket attacks from Hamas, Israel launched its military campaign ‘Operation Guardian of the Walls’ and struck Hamas’ tunnels, warehouse containing weapons, military assets, buildings used by Hamas operatives among other targets. The conflict continued for 11 days, killing more than 248 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. Both the parties agreed to a ceasefire agreement under international pressure and Egyptian mediation on May 21, 2020.

## **Israeli Foreign Minister visits Egypt first time in 13 years**

Israeli Foreign Minister, Gabi Ashkenazi, visited Egypt and met his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, on May 30, 2021. The two foreign ministers discussed possible ways to build peace between Israel and Hamas, and facilitate “urgent reconstruction of the Gaza Strip.” Ashkenazi also demanded the return of Israeli soldiers and citizens in the custody of Hamas. Shoukry stressed that the

ceasefire agreement must be strengthened by avoiding confrontations in Palestinian territories, specifically in East Jerusalem, which comprises Jewish, Islamic and Christian holy places. Egypt also called for developing a conducive “atmosphere” to revive the halted talks between Israel and Palestinians aiming to reach a “two-state solution.”

## **Gulf states condemn Israel for clash with Hamas**

The Gulf Arab states condemned the violent clash between Israel and the Hamas. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud criticised Israel for violating the sanctity of the holy sites of Islam and evicting Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah. Oman slammed the Israeli police actions at the Al Aqsa Mosque and reiterated support for an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital. Bahrain issued a strongly-worded statement critical of the Israeli actions in Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount and said that it must stop provocations against the people of Jerusalem. Qatar pledged US\$ 500 million for reconstruction in Gaza. Kuwait denounced Israel's continued construction of settlements, displacement and evacuation in Sheikh Jarrah. The UAE also condemned the clashes and the potential evictions, and urged Israeli authorities to reduce tensions.

## **Negotiations continue in Vienna to revive the JCPOA**

Iran and the signatories of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – Russia, China, France, the UK, Germany

and the EU – are engaged in negotiations in Vienna to find a way to revive the nuclear deal. The US is not participating in the negotiations directly but the messages of the meeting are relayed to the US delegation present in Vienna. Five rounds of talks have been held so far, and the representatives have expressed their optimism in the progress of the negotiations. One of the major demands Iran has put forth is lifting of all sanctions before reversing its step on nuclear activities. The US, on the other hand, has stated that Iran must fully comply with the JCPOA for the sanctions to be lifted.

### **Iran and IAEA agree to extend nuclear monitoring deal for one month**

Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have agreed to extend the necessary verification and monitoring activities carried out by the Agency in Iran. Both have agreed that the information collected by the Agency monitoring equipment covered by a Technical Understanding signed in February 2021 will continue up to June 24, 2021. During the period the equipment will continue to operate and be able to collect and store further data for this period.

### **Iran announces candidates for 13th Presidential election**

Iran's Guardian Council announced a list of seven approved candidates for the 13<sup>th</sup> presidential election to be held on June 18, 2018. The list includes Ebrahim Raeisi, Mohsen Rezaei, Mohsen Mehr Alizadeh, Saeed Jalili, Alireza Zakani, Abdol Nasser

Hemmati and Amirhossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi. Many top candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council including Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri and former Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani.

### **Russia deploys nuclear capable bombers to Syria**

On May 25, 2021, the Russian military announced its deployment of three nuclear-capable long-range bombers to its base in Syria. Russian Defence Ministry said that three Tu-22M3 bombers arrived at the Hemeimeem air base in Latakia. The Tupolev Tu-22M3 is a supersonic twin-engine long-range bomber capable of carrying nuclear weapons and has a range exceeding 5,000 kms. Russia has deployed heavy bombers in the region for the first time after the Cold War, and as per some media reports, the Tu-22M3 can be modernized to carry the latest hypersonic missiles.

### **Egypt and Pakistan conduct joint air defence exercise**

Egypt and Pakistan conducted a joint air defence exercise named 'Guardians of the Sky-1' that began on May 26, 2021. The exercise includes training for securing the airspace and significant assets while ensuring competent planning and administration of operations. As per the Egyptian armed forces' spokesman Col. Tamer Al Refai, the exercise aims to improve the experience sharing and capacities of the armed forces between the two. He emphasised that the exercise would develop in interoperability of the armed forces of the two countries.

## **Assad wins Syrian presidential election**

Syrian President Bashar Al Assad won the election held on May 26, 2021 for the fourth term. Besides Assad, the two other candidates in the election were Mahmoud Ahmed Marei, head of a small officially sanctioned opposition party and Abdallah Saloum Abdallah, a former deputy cabinet minister. Assad won the presidential election by over 95 percent votes. Prior to the election, several countries had expressed concerns about the fairness and legitimacy of the election.

## **Imran Khan visits Saudi Arabia**

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan made a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia on May 7, 2021. During the visit, both the countries decided to establish a higher coordination council. MoUs were signed between the two countries on combating drug trafficking, financing energy, infrastructure, transportation, water and communications projects. Both the countries stressed on need for counter-terrorism efforts and affirmed support for the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the political solutions in Syria and Libya.

## **Youths stage protests in Oman demanding jobs**

On 23 May 2021, protests were held in Sohar, Rustaq, Nizwa and Sur cities of Oman by youths demanding jobs. The protests follow the introduction of VAT last month in a series of reforms to ensure the Sultanate's financial sustainability. Following the protests, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq issued new directives to create up to

32,000 full-time or part-time jobs in government departments. Oman's economy is vulnerable to oil price fluctuations and external shocks, with a high level of debts. This is the first major protest since Sultan Haitham took over in January 2020 after the demise of Sultan Qaboos.

## **UAE announces 100 percent foreign ownership of onshore companies**

The UAE's Ministry of Economy has announced that as per the amended Commercial Companies Law, foreign investors and entrepreneurs will be allowed to establish and fully own onshore companies from June 2021. Abdulla bin Touq Al Marri, Minister of Economy, said that the amendment aims at boosting the country's competitive edge and is a part of UAE government's efforts to facilitate doing business. He added that it will further strengthen the country's standing as an international economic centre and encourage investment flows to vital sectors of the Emirati economy. The amendments are the latest in a series of measures aimed at liberalising business activities in the UAE.