



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

- **Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume diplomatic relations**
- **GCC Ministerial Council meeting held**
- **Mass protests erupt in Israel**
- **Iran, China and Russia hold joint military exercise**
- **Yemeni government and Houthis agree on prisoner exchange**
- **UAE-Israel sign customs agreement**
- **Syrian President visits UAE**
- **Saudi Arabia to join SCO as a dialogue partner**
- **UAE President appoints Crown Prince and deputy leaders**

Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume diplomatic relations

On March 10, 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume their diplomatic relations that were severed in 2016 after Iranian protesters attacked the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran. The China-mediated agreement intends to end the confrontation between the two regional rivals and has the potential to change the regional politics and security in the Gulf. The two countries have mutually agreed to uphold each other's sovereignty and decided to refrain from meddling in one another's internal affairs. They agreed to implement the security cooperation agreement that was signed between them in 2001 and to further cooperate in bilateral trade, investment, scientific and cultural cooperation between them. Following the agreement, both foreign ministers have also held telephone conversations regarding their meeting to finalise the next moves.

GCC Ministerial Council meeting held

The foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the GCC Secretary General attended the 155th session of the Ministerial Council of the GCC in Riyadh. The meeting was chaired by Oman's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi. The meeting welcomed the Saudi-Iran rapprochement and affirmed its support and solidarity with the victims of the earthquake in Turkiye and Syria. While discussing security challenges in the region, the meeting condemned the support of external powers for terrorist groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and other countries.

Mass protests erupt in Israel

A series of protests that started after Israel's newly appointed Justice Minister Yariv Levin announced his government's plan to introduce judicial reforms turned into a major political crisis in March 2023. The proposed Israeli judicial reforms are a

package of bills which include two important bills that will change the makeup of a nine-member committee that selects the judge and introduce an overriding clause that would give parliament the power to pass laws previously ruled invalid by the court, respectively. The crisis escalated after Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, urged a pause in the judicial overhaul, citing the growing social rift which has turned into a tangible security threat for Israel. The following day he was dismissed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Considering the deteriorating situation, the government paused the second and third reading of the bill on March 28, 2023.

Iran, China and Russia hold joint military exercise

Navies of Iran, China and Russia conducted a four-day long joint naval drill named 'Security-Belt-2023', in the Gulf of Oman. It aimed at deepening practical cooperation among the naval forces of participating countries. During the exercise, various drills on maritime shooting, joint search and rescue, communications, counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations were conducted. A similar exercise was also conducted in 2019 by the three countries. The US National Security Council spokesperson, John Kirby, said that "the White House was not concerned by the joint training exercise." He further noted that the US would watch it and monitor it to make sure that the exercise does not harm its national interest.

Yemeni government and Houthis agree on prisoner exchange

Under the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross-brokered agreement, Yemen's Houthis and the government agreed to exchange some 880 prisoners. According to the deal, the Houthi group would release 181 detainees, including 15 Saudis and three Sudanese, in exchange for 706 prisoners from the government. While

commenting on the agreements, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, said that the deal was one of the various developments that highlighted that things were moving “in the right direction” and in the direction of resolving an eight-year conflict. The deal has given hope to the international community that it can facilitate broader efforts to end the conflict, which have been strengthened by the restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

UAE-Israel sign customs agreement

The UAE and Israel signed a customs agreement on March 27, 2023. The agreement was signed by the UAE’s Ambassador to Israel, Mohamed Al Khaja, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel, Eli Cohen, in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. The signing of the customs agreement has officially brought into effect the UAE-Israel Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in May 2022. The customs agreement aimed at enabling mutual assistance in ensuring the proper application of customs laws, accurately assessing customs and other tax fees on exports and imports, adjusting customs data and preventing and investigating customs violations. Both countries expect that with the CEPA entering into force, the trade volume between the countries will increase significantly.

Syrian President visits UAE

Syrian President, Bashar Al Assad, was on an official visit to the UAE on March 19, 2023. It was his second visit to the UAE since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. The visit was significant since the Gulf States, including the UAE, backed the rebels fighting to overthrow the Assad regime. The visit took place at a time when Arab states are signalling openness to ease the isolation of Damascus. President Assad and Sheikh Mohammed, Vice President and

Prime Minister of the UAE, held talks aimed at developing relations between our two countries. The discussions also explored ways of enhancing cooperation to accelerate stability and progress in Syria and the region. The US State Department stated that they are profoundly disappointed and troubled by this attempt to legitimise Bashar Assad given the latter’s brutal response during the conflict.

Saudi Arabia to join SCO as a dialogue partner

On March 29, 2023, the Saudi cabinet approved the proposal to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner making it the third Arab country to do so after Egypt and Qatar. Riyadh’s move to partner with the bloc comes less than three weeks after Riyadh agreed to restart diplomatic relations with Tehran. The Saudi decision to join the SCO is yet another indication of its gradual shift away from dependence on the West, particularly the US, and a move towards the East. Other countries from West Asia with either observer or dialogue partner status are Egypt, Iran and Qatar.

UAE President appoints Crown Prince and deputy leaders

On March 29, 2023, President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed named his son Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. The choice of Sheikh Khaled reflects a trend across most Gulf Arab monarchies towards direct lineage - sons over brothers - for succession, including in Saudi Arabia. He also appointed his brother Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed as the Vice-President who would serve alongside Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. He also named two other brothers Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed – the current National Security Adviser, and Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed, as deputy rulers of Abu Dhabi.