



West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



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EDITORIAL

Strategic Realignment in the West Asian Region

The West Asian region witnessed a major strategic development in 26 years as two Gulf States agreed to normalize relations with Israel in September 2020. The UAE and Bahrain respectively became third and fourth Arab states to recognize Israel after Egypt and Jordan. Signing of “Abraham Accords” facilitated by the US reflects a key strategic realignment in the West Asian region with far reaching implications on future geopolitical developments in the region. This growing formalizing relations with Israel by the Gulf countries has been condemned by the Palestinians calling it as a betrayal of their cause. While agreements are proposed to advance lasting peace in West Asia and around the world, however the real outcome is still awaited.

In the context of the new regional alignments and realignments, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq met for their 3rd trilateral summit on August 26, 2020 in Amman to discuss ways to expand their economic, trade and investment cooperation and coordinate their efforts to address issues of common concerns. Equally significant development has been the aggressive role played by Turkey in the regional geopolitics and its military adventurism. Ankara’s rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean has not only drawn other regional countries, but also the European Union. In addition to the above, a major crisis unfolded in Lebanon with a massive explosion on August 04, 2020. The massive explosion on the port of Beirut killed more than 200 people and left another 6,500 injured. Identified as one of the biggest non-nuclear explosion in the history, this explosion resulted in a massive loss to property nearing US\$ 15 billion and 3,00,000 people left homeless.

As in the past, Iran-US tensions and the Trump Administration’s ‘maximum pressure’ policy continued to draw attention globally with no consequential results to halt Iran’s regional policy approach. American attempt to push the UN to extend arms embargo on Iran did not get required support. The present US policy reflects the Trump Administration’s desire to push Iran for negotiating a new nuclear deal. However, despite tremendous stress on its economy, Iran remains defiant and undeterred. It has, in fact, managed to outmaneuver the US for now. In response to Washington’s ‘maximum pressure’ policy, Tehran has come up with its ‘maximum resistance’ strategy.

Other significant development in the region was the announcement of the much-hyped Iran-China 25-years Comprehensive Strategic Partnership plan, whereby both countries propose to take their long-term partnership to a new level through the US\$ 400 billion agreement. The importance of this plan needs to be viewed in the context of Beijing’s increasing ties with the region and growing tensions between China-US

and Iran-US. In the future, Iran may emerge as a stepping stone for more Chinese involvement in security and geostrategic space of West Asia.

Against such a backdrop, the current edition of the Newsletter has tried to capture some important developments covering issues like Turkey and the increasing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Palestinian response to the Abraham Accords and Kadhimi's assertive approach towards Iran.

COMMENTARY

Turkey and the Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

Md. Muddassir Quamar

Tensions have [gripped the Eastern Mediterranean](#) (East Med) for the past few months owing to differences between Turkey, Cyprus and Greece over the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Mediterranean Sea and the right to undertake gas exploration activities in the resource-rich waters. The root of the dispute lies in the definition of the EEZ and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Turkey considers itself at a disadvantage in the East Med (as well as the Aegean Sea) due to the UNCLOS, and hence, has not signed the Convention. It disputes the EEC claims of Cyprus and Greece that overlap the Turkish definition of the EEZ in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the conflict between Turkey and Cyprus going back to 1974 over Northern Cyprus, makes the issue more complex. The exclusion of Turkey from the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#) formed in early 2019, had alarmed Ankara on its claims being overlooked by the regional grouping.

Turkey has since then undertaken aggressive drilling activities in the East Med to explore for hydrocarbon and this has accentuated the matter, especially since both Cyprus and Greece are members of the European Union (EU) and the Turkish action invited

[sanctions from the EU](#). As the hostilities continued to rise, the [EU threatened to sanction](#) Turkey but withheld the imposition giving talks a chance. However, with the rising hostilities in Libya, the situation in the East Med got convoluted and intertwined with the Libyan conflict. In November 2019, Ankara [signed an agreement on maritime boundary](#) in the Mediterranean Sea with the UN-recognised Tripoli-based government in Libya led by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj. The agreement facilitated Turkish military intervention in the Libyan conflict on behalf of the Tripoli government that was under serious attack by the Libyan National Army of General Khalifa Haftar that is aligned with the Tobruk-based government of House of Representative (HoR) led by Speaker of the HoR, Aguila Saleh Issa.

Notwithstanding the way Turkish interventions [transformed the conflict in Libya](#), it led to Ankara increasing drilling activities in the East Med claiming the additional justification of a pact with the Sarraj-led government. The Turkish activities brought it in conflict with Greece and Cyprus as well as pitched it against Egypt, Israel and other countries who share the EEZ in the East Med. France, which unlike Turkey, has no direct stake in the East

Med, became involved because of its growing desire under President Emmanuel Macron to play a greater role in the Mediterranean and North and Sub-Saharan Africa because of its colonial legacies. As member of the EU, France came out in the support of Greece and Cyprus which led to tense moments between Paris and Ankara, putting them [on collision course](#). Even Italy, that in the Libyan conflict was sympathetic to the Sarraj government, took a position against aggressive Turkish behaviour in the East Med as member of the EU.

The growing tensions led to the US joining the theatre to mediate between the parties involved. The US under the auspices of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been trying to bring Turkey and Greece, both members of the alliance, on the negotiations table and find a workable solution to ease the tensions. The US intervention helped as [both Ankara and Athens have shown inclination for talks](#). The Turkish decision to withdraw its exploration and drilling ships [Oruc Reis](#) and [Yavuz](#) from the disputed waters have helped tone down the rhetoric on both sides. Ankara and Athens have agreed to establish a bilateral military de-confliction mechanism to reduce the escalation. Nonetheless, the situation remains strained.

The Turkish actions in the East Med are part of its larger international relations wherein it has adopted an assertive foreign policy to regain its lost international influence. However, this

has put it at odds with all major regional and international actors. Its actions in Syria, Qatar and Libya, for example, placed it at odds with leading Arab countries including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran. Moreover, its aggressive postures in the Middle East and the Mediterranean has created tensions with Israel. Turkish criticism of the [UAE-Bahrain-Israel agreement](#) to normalise relations further aggravated the situation. In Libya, the manoeuvring by Ankara and Cairo have brought the two regional players on the verge of a military conflict. This has led to Egypt and Israel [come out in support of Greece and Cyprus](#) in the East Med. Turkish relations with the EU and the US are also at an all-time low. While the EU has suspended accession talks with Ankara and weighing economic sanctions, the relations with the US have nosedived since the Turkish decision [to buy S-400 missile defence system](#) from Russia. Turkey's relations with Russia have also come under strain due to, among other factors, Ankara's role in escalation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, but thus far Moscow has taken a considerate position on the issue and has urged all [parties to stop the fighting and resolve differences through talks](#) and has kept the lines of communications with Ankara open.

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has adopted an [aggressive foreign policy posture](#) aimed at asserting Turkish regional and global power status. Turkey considers itself a

natural regional leader in the Middle East, Mediterranean and the South Caucasus because of its location, demography and size of its economy and wishes to achieve global middle power status. Erdogan believes that the only way Turkey can assert itself in regional and global politics [is by regaining lost influence](#) in the neighbourhood and its historical area of influence in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. This brings back memories of the imperialist overreach of the Ottoman Empire among the regional countries, placing them at odds with Turkey and the condemnation of [Erdogan's "neo-Ottoman" desires](#). Foreign policy apart, for Erdogan the rhetoric to revive past glory is an effective domestic tool to maintain his popularity, especially at a time when the Turkish economy has suffered setbacks and the polity is

seriously fissured due to Erdogan's authoritarian and autocratic style of governance.

For now, the tensions in the East Med have been brought down due to NATO's intervention and the willingness of both Greece and Turkey to talk. However, the lure for hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean remains intact and the likelihood of a long-term resolution in the East Med is bleak. Ankara is unlikely to easily give up its claims over the disputed waters and Erdogan appears bent on mounting a hard bargain. Meanwhile, the aggressive foreign policy posture serves his domestic political agenda.

(Dr. Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre in the MP-IDSA)

Palestinian Response to the Abraham Accords

Adil Rasheed and Jatin Kumar

The recently signed Abraham Accords, which normalized Israel's relations with the UAE and Bahrain, have proven historic even in ways not intended by its signatories. For one, the agreements have so incensed most Palestinian factions that they have decided to set aside their longstanding internecine differences and put up a rare united front against decision of the UAE and Bahrain to normalize relations with Israel. The decision for an intra-Palestinian reconciliation came at a [September 3 meeting](#) headed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh, Islamic Jihad's chief Ziyad Al Nakhala, as well as senior leaders of other important Palestinian groups.

Fatah, Hamas Patch Up

The two main Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah have been bitter rivals since 2007, when Hamas threw out Fatah's security forces from Gaza following months of tension. However, the two sides are now working to overcome their differences in order to counter what Husam Badran, a member of Hamas' political bureau, [calls](#) "a treacherous stab in the back of the Palestinians" by some Arab states. The meeting decided to set up three committees: one focusing on forming a unified leadership of all major Palestinian groups to start popular struggle against the Israeli 'occupation',

the second intending to build a common vision for ending the division between Gaza and the West Bank, while a third for strategizing the revival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

Following the meeting, Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh left for Lebanon where he met Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah to discuss ways of ["countering the Zionist plans"](#). The leaders also stressed the need to reiterate the "axis of resistance" against the state of Israel. The Hamas chief was also accorded a hero's welcome during the [visit](#) to Ain al Helweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. According to UNRWA around 470,000 Palestinian refugees currently [live](#) in Lebanon. Unity among Palestinian groups is the result of a near spontaneous outburst of popular protests in Palestinian territories that followed the August 13 Israel-UAE normalization deal announcement by US President Trump.

'Day of Rage' Protests

A week after the announcement an estimated 2,000 Palestinians [took part](#) at a rally in Turmusaya, a village in the north of West Bank, "Today we tell the world that we are united against 'the deal of the century,' annexation and normalization," Palestinian Authority

Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh told the rally in the village.

Protests continued sporadically until the day Israel, the UAE and Bahrain signed the normalization agreements in Washington on September 15, 2020. That day was itself declared a '[day of rage](#)' by Palestinian factions, who urged supporters of the Palestinian cause to demonstrate in Palestinian areas, refugee camps as well as in front of embassies of the US, Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and around the world. However, the public response to this call was mixed and the number of protests have fizzled out since then.

Palestinian Setback at Arab League

In fact, a bigger setback awaited Palestinian leaders when they attempted to censure the UAE over the normalization agreement at the Arab League. In a video conference of the Arab League members' foreign ministers that was held on September 9, 2020, Palestinian representatives presented a proposal for the bloc to issue a formal condemnation of the Abraham Accords, as it seemed to be in breach of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. However, after hours of deliberations the Arab League [dropped](#) the draft resolution that condemned the Israeli-UAE agreement, even though the final communique maintained the League's commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, the two-state solution, and the land-for-peace principle.

Writing for the news agency Media Line, Uri Cohen [names](#) the countries that opposed the Palestinian draft resolution: "Countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Sudan and all Gulf nations elected to vote down the draft, instead passing an alternative resolution that holds no condemnation of the UAE's act. Still, Palestine did not go home empty-handed, as it managed to extract a statement from Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud reinforcing the Saudis' commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders with east Jerusalem as its capital."

Even Ahmed Abul Gheit, the Secretary General of the League refused to condemn the Israel-UAE normalization deal but stressed that the Palestinian cause was and remains an issue for Arab consensus. He further [added](#) that every Arab country has the "sovereign and indisputable right" to conduct its foreign policy the way it sees fit.

In protest of this stance of the Arab League, Palestine quit its current chairmanship of Arab League meetings. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad Al Maliki was supposed to chair Arab League meetings for the next six months, but he announced that Palestine no longer wanted that position stating that "Palestine has decided to concede its right to chair the League's Council [of foreign ministers] at its current session. There is no honour in seeing Arabs rush towards normalisation during its presidency."

The Pivot to Turkey

With Palestinian efforts to drum up international support for their cause tailing off without much traction, Fatah and Hamas have started [shoring up ties](#) with Turkey and Qatar that opposed Arab normalization of ties with Israel. On September 21, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan to thank him for his continued support to the Palestinian cause. It is reported that the two had held several exchanges on phone in the past weeks to devise a strategy for reviving the Palestinian cause.

For his part, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh had earlier visited Ankara and met Erdogan on August 22, where they reportedly [discussed](#) ways to end internal Palestinian division. A month later, Erdogan minced no words in his [speech](#) at the 75th United Nations General Assembly meeting, where he said, “The occupation of Palestine is

a bleeding wound,” and that “Israel is constantly increasing its audacity in the holy sites in Jerusalem.”

Conclusion

The Palestinian groups have started uniting under a hard-line position against the decision of most Arab states that support normalizing relations with Israel. In pursuit of this approach, even moderate Palestinian groups like Fatah are joining forces with more radical Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and are looking for support from non-Arab powers like Turkey and Iran. It remains to be seen whether a possible rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states is sustainable in the absence of an Israel-Palestine peace settlement.

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Kadhimi's Assertive Approach towards Iran

Prabhat Jawa

In May 2020, after months of political wrangling, the Iraqi Parliament (Council of Representatives) approved the Government of Mustafa Al Kadhimi, who had been heading the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) since 2016. Ever since assuming office, Kadhimi has wrestled with various sets of political, economic and foreign policy challenges. The most fascinating of these challenges has been Kadhimi's management of Iraq-Iran relations in the light of worsening Iran-US relations. His prime ministership seems to have taken a more assertive approach with regards to Iran, where rather than confronting Iran directly, Kadhimi has chosen to slowly curb its influence within Iraq.

After being declared as the Prime Minister-designate in March, Kadhimi faced scathing opposition from the Fatah Alliance, which is majorly composed of Shia groups close to Iran. These groups alleged his closeness to Washington as a major impediment in supporting him. Even though the Shia coalition came around, but Kadhimi has faced long-drawn criticism of his policies being anti-Iranian and pro-US.

A key aspect of Kadhimi's approach that has differed from his precursors has been his position on foreign intervention in various Iraqi institutions, particularly in Iraq's security structure. In his writings in the *Al-Monitor*, he had expressed strong

views about depoliticizing the Popular Mobilisation Front (PMF)—an umbrella organisation of militias, which was constituted by a [fatwa](#) by Ayatollah Sistani in June 2014. Major militias under PMF are Badr Organization, Asa'ibAhl al-Haq (AAH), Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, among others. In general, the heads of these militias have had a strong [affinity](#) with Iran, primarily because they were exiled in Iran after the Eight-Years War (1981-88), which enables Iran's strong influence within Iraq.

The PMF established a decentralized militia that operates under the office of the Prime Minister, but most of the planning and operational aspects stay with the chairman of the PMF and his deputy, which renders PMF out of the chain of command. Usually, these two positions have been held by individuals closer to Tehran. Earlier, this year, the head of the PMF, [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#) was killed alongside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike. After Muhandis, [Abu Fadak al-Mohammadawi](#) replaced him, who is also close to Tehran. Soon after his appointment as the head of the PMF was announced, the Iranian-linked social media accounts started circulating the pictures of Fadak with Soleimani, where Soleimani is seen

kissing his forehead, a respected gesture within the culture.

Since he came to office, Kadhimi has pursued an assertive policy against the PMF, which aims to demobilize the organization by assimilating it under the Iraqi Armed Forces. Such outspoken attempts have led to confrontation between PMF and the Prime Minister's Office. The critics of PMF argue that it had fulfilled its mandate of fighting the Islamic State; therefore, it is no longer needed. They also cite the irregularities and mismanagement of their funds that include salaries, offices and benefits, which are concerning given that such funds (about [\\$2 billion](#) annually) are provided from the state budget, which is already under severe strain owing to the economic crisis.

Additionally, he had made significant changes in Iraq's security structure, his domain for the last four years. Kadhimi [reinstated](#) Lieutenant General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi as the Chief of the Iraqi Counterterrorism Agency, who had faced criticism under the Mahdi government, who later sacked him. Other [appointments](#) into crucial offices include Qasim al-Araji as National Security Advisor, replacing Faleh al-Fayadh— a prominent figure within the PMF, assigning General Abdul-Ghani al-Asadi as the head of national security agency and appointments to multiple other positions. Such a change in leadership of the PMF is an attempt to curb the Iranian influence, without confronting Tehran directly.

Yet another instance of such behaviour was when the Iranian energy minister

was visiting Iraq in August, the timing of which coincided with the Second US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. During this visit, the Iranian delegation included Ismail Ghani, the IRGC commander who succeeded Soleimani. His entry into Iraq was made conditional on obtaining a prior visa, which was a stark change under Kadhimi's predecessors, who never dared to put such conditions on Soleimani.

As soon as the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was relaxed, Kadhimi declared Riyadh as his first destination for a foreign visit. This came as a shock for the groups closer to Iran. Though the trip was eventually cancelled owing to King Salman's health, Kadhimi made his first visit to Tehran as the Prime Minister, his decision in this regard reflecting his cold approach towards Iran. Further, in May 2020, during a visit by Iraq's finance minister, a deal was finalized with Riyadh that provided [\\$3 billion](#) to Iraq to meet its budgetary requirements. Additionally, Riyadh will make investments in the Iraqi natural gas sector. Iran-backed groups criticized such a move.

Unlike his predecessors who chose to pursue a policy of status quo, Kadhimi has taken a more assertive tone against Iran. However, instead of confronting Iran directly, it has primarily targeted Iran's influence within Iraq. He has been able to strike a delicate balance between Iraqi interests, without upsetting Iraq's relations with Iran. In moving ahead, the extensive Iranian influence within Iraq is likely to continue under Kadhimi's term;

however, the minor incremental changes that he has adopted hold the potential for change in Iraqi politics. In other words, it is difficult at present to assess how much change Kadhimi's rule will bring to Iraq, as well as its relations

with Iran, but his term marks a change from the past.

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WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

Israel, UAE and Bahrain sign Abraham Accords

WASHINGTON (16 September, 2020): Israel signed normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain commonly known as the “Abraham Accords”, at the White House. The signing of the agreements reflects a strategic realignment in the West Asian region. The UAE and Bahrain are the third and fourth Arab states to normalize ties with Israel after Egypt and Jordan. The three countries [agreed](#) that the best way to address challenges is through cooperation and dialogue and that developing friendly relations among states advances the interests of lasting peace in West Asia and around the world.

Reacting to the agreement, [Ammar Hijazi](#), assistant minister of multilateral affairs for the Palestinian Authority, said that it was a sad day and the only path for peace is ending this brutal Israeli occupation and granting the Palestinians their inalienable rights for self-determination. He added that without that there is no path to peace in the region. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump said that he expects some more Arab countries to normalize ties with Israel and predicted the Palestinians would eventually join as well or else be “left out in the cold”.- *Times of Israel, Al Jazeera*

GCC urges UN to extend arms embargo on Iran

RIYADH (10 August, 2020): The GCC’s Secretary General, Nayef Al-Hajraf, urged the UN to extend the international arms embargo on Iran. In a letter to the Security Council, he mentioned that the embargo should be extended as Tehran supports terrorism. As per the embargo, the movement of conventional weaponry in and out of Iran is prevented. The embargo is set to expire on 18 October 2020 as part of the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal. [Al-Hajraf](#), pointed out that in violation of the deal, Iran “continued to proliferate conventional weapons and armed terrorist and sectarian organizations and movements throughout the region.”

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, [Abbas Mousavi](#) slammed the GCC for urging the UN to extend arms embargo and said that the GCC Secretariat is swayed by the wrong and destructive policies and has turned into a mouthpiece for anti-Iran elements. The US welcomed the move as Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said, “The GCC’s letter calling on the UN Security Council to extend the arms embargo on Iran is a bold statement.” US has warned that if the embargo is lifted, it could introduce “snap back” sanctions built into the original 2015 deal, unilaterally restoring all UN sanctions on Tehran.-*Arab News, Middle East Monitor*

US imposes sanctions on Iran

TEHRAN (20 September, 2020): The Trump administration [declared](#) that UN sanctions have once again been imposed on Iran, meaning for example that the arms embargo scheduled to expire next month has been extended indefinitely, as far as the US is concerned. “...as far as the US is concerned” is the key part of that sentence, because for the most part, the rest of the world disagrees. The remaining participants in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal have rejected the US argument that it’s still entitled to invoke that deal’s dispute resolution mechanism to re-impose the sanctions, despite having quit the deal in 2018. The UN Security Council has simply ignored the US invocation, since apart from the Dominican Republic all the other council members similarly reject the claim that the US is entitled to take this step. UN Secretary-General António Guterres says the UN [cannot](#) act on the US declaration because there’s too much “uncertainty” over the process.

Even Iran is trying to dunk on the US over this, with President Hassan Rouhani [saying](#) that Washington “is approaching a certain defeat in its sanctions move.” It’s of course one thing for everybody to chuckle and roll their eyes at this most recent rogue action by the Trump administration in abstract. – *Ynets, News, Aawsat, Jerusalem Post, Iran International*

Jordan’s King Abdullah hosts summit with Egyptian President and Iraqi Prime Minister

AMMAN (26 August, 2020): Jordan’s King Abdullah II, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi met for the third trilateral summit between the three countries on 26 August 2020 at Amman. During the summit, the leaders discussed various ways to expand economic, trade and investment cooperation. The discussion also “covered regional developments and means to bolster coordination and consultation between Jordan, [Egypt and Iraq on issues of mutual concern](#)”. - *Al Arabiya*

Houthi-Saudi escalation continues amidst prisoners swap

SANAA (02 July, 2020): The Houthis and Saudi Arabia continue to [engage](#) in missile and drone attacks. Regardless of the scope, this resumption of heavy fighting obviously means that the implementation of 2018 Stockholm peace process will be further delayed. On 29 September, The government and Houthi rebels agreed on a major [exchange](#) of 1081 prisoners, their largest since Yemen’s civil war began and the first real movement towards implementing a 2018 de-escalation agreement in months. That agreement first established a ceasefire in the Yemeni port city of Hudaydah, which has more or less held, but it mapped out further steps towards peace talks, starting with a prisoner swap, that had hitherto gone nowhere. The swap was the outcome of United Nations-

[brokered](#) negotiations between the parties in early September. If all goes according to plan, this will be the largest prisoner release in the Yemeni war so far, and ideally would help build some confidence for further negotiations. -*Al Jazeera, Anadolu Agency, Ahram*

Yemen southern separatists pull out of Riyadh agreement talks

ADEN (26 August, 2020): The separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) has [pulled out](#) of negotiations in Riyadh aimed at repairing its relationship with the Yemeni government. They cited deterioration in “public services” in southern Yemen and escalations by the Yemeni military in Abyan province as reasons for their withdrawal. This could lead to renewed violence between government forces and UAE-backed STC fighters, though it is too soon to say. This could also just be a negotiating ploy. -*Middle East Monitor*

Turkey, France row over Mediterranean claims

ISTANBUL (24 July, 2020): Turkey and France are [still feuding](#) over the eastern Mediterranean. The Greek government put its navy on alert over Turkish plans to drill for undersea energy deposits near a Greek island, an area that Turkey nevertheless claims under a “continental shelf” standard of maritime law. This prompted French President Emmanuel Macron to call for European Union sanctions against Turkey for violating the sovereignty of an EU member state, which led to an

angry rebuke from Ankara. -*en.Qantara.de*

Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi visits Iran

BAGHDAD (21 July, 2020): Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi [visited Iran](#) on his first overseas trip since becoming Prime Minister in May. Kadhimi met with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the latter promising not to interfere in Iraq’s relationship with the US. In return, Kadhimi [promised](#) not to allow Iraqi soil to be used to stage “any aggression or challenge to Iran.” -*Al Jazeera*

Series of explosions in Lebanon lead to public outcry

BEIRUT (10 September, 2020): Beirut’s [seaport](#) is on fire. The same facility that was largely destroyed last month when an ignored stockpile of ammonium nitrate exploded is now experiencing a large blaze at a tire warehouse. While the fire had been mostly extinguished, it apparently [destroyed](#) a large cache of food shipments and its smoke may be [toxic](#). According to the Lebanese government, the [death toll](#) from the explosion at Beirut port earlier this month now stands at 190, with 6500 injured and three people still missing. Rescue workers who [believed](#) several days ago that they had found signs of a survivor in the wreckage of Beirut’s massive seaport explosion last month have now [concluded](#) that those “signs” were actually caused by recovery workers on site. They have been unable

to detect any signs of life in the wreckage.

Lebanon will [begin](#) its formal investigation into the explosion at Beirut's port earlier this month. The investigation is being handled by the Lebanese military and is led by a military judge. He will be looking at the conduct of some 25 officials involved in running the port, all of whom are bureaucrats and therefore not really culpable in having created the political morass that caused the explosion and is Lebanon's true problem. The investigation promises to have significant political ramifications.

The Lebanese parliament [voted](#) on 13 August to ratify the state of emergency that has been in place since the explosion at Beirut's port that led to [violent](#) protests. Demonstrators [broke](#) into the offices of the Lebanese economy, energy, and foreign ministries. The protesters demanded political change, and their protests explicitly targeted prominent political figures like President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, as well as prominent political figures like Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The entire cabinet and members of parliament had resigned. –*Maritime Insight, Daily Sabha, Arab News, Middle East Monitor, Al Jazeera, TRT World, The Guardian, en.Qantara.de, Haaretz*

EU wants a credible government in Lebanon

BEIRUT (13 September, 2020): The European Union is apparently waiting

until Lebanon has a "[credible](#)" government in place before it sends any more disaster relief assistance to help the recovery from the explosion at Beirut's seaport. Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adib reportedly [withdrew](#) himself from consideration for the job. Adib ran into a brick wall in the form of Lebanon's two major Shi'a parties, Amal and Hezbollah, and their insistence on retaining control over certain offices, most particularly over the finance ministry. Adib sought to divest the cabinet nomination process from the various political factions that have traditionally controlled it, ostensibly to create a "government of experts" but more to respond to Western concerns over the extent of Hezbollah influence in Beirut.

The fallout from Adib's withdrawal is still playing out and has been superseded by other events, but it may signal the death knell of a European initiative, spearheaded by French President Emmanuel Macron, to reform Lebanese politics using the carrot and stick policy of potential European aid as leverage. Macron has already [blamed](#) Amal and Hezbollah for Adib's failure and said he was "ashamed" of Lebanese leaders. –*Daily Star, Al Jazeera, Jerusalem Post*

Iran and China discussing 25 years strategic partnership

TEHRAN (11 July 2020): Iran and China are discussing their [25 year strategic deal](#). The partnership, detailed in an 18-page proposed agreement, vastly expands Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports,

railways and other projects. In exchange, China would receive a regular and heavily discounted supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years. The document also describes deepening military cooperation, potentially giving China a foothold in a region that has been a strategic preoccupation of the United States for decades. It calls for joint training and exercises, joint research and weapons development and intelligence-sharing — all to fight “the lopsided battle with terrorism, drug and human trafficking and cross-border crimes.” There’s nothing in this description about China basing soldiers in Iran or gaining control of any Iranian islands as part of the agreement, but those aspects are still heavily rumoured and have been the source of substantial disagreement over the partnership, within Iran. The Chinese investments could total as much as \$400 billion over the life of the deal. —*New Yorker*

UN approves aid to Syria’s rebel-held area through one border crossing

DAMASCUS (13 July 2020): In the face of Russian resistance, the United Nations Security Council voted to [reauthorize](#) humanitarian aid shipments from Turkey into northwestern Syria by only one border crossing rather than the two that had previously been in operation. The authorization for all UN aid operations in Syria had expired and the Council has struggled to come to some agreement about reauthorization. Russia and China vetoed two Resolutions that would have kept both

crossings open, while the Council voted down two Russian Resolutions limiting shipments to one crossing. The Resolution that was finally passed — authored by Germany and Belgium — only keeps one crossing open but does so for 12 months (Russia had sought six) and does not contain language blaming Syria’s humanitarian crisis on Western sanctions, as the Russian Resolutions had. —*Arab News*

Turkey-Russia fragile ceasefire

DAMASCUS (06 August 2020): There are [signs](#) the Turkish-Russian ceasefire in southern Idlib province is breaking down, as Turkey has been unable to control rebel factions there and consequently the ceasefire has failed to achieve its main objective— the reopening of Syria’s M4 highway. Russian and Syrian air and artillery attacks are starting to resume, which could be the precursor to a renewed full-scale offensive. Local sources seem to think the Turks might be willing to trade territory in southern Idlib for Russian concessions in Libya, and maybe to avoid a new military operation that would push more displaced Syrians towards the border. —*Al Monitor*

Talks on Syria constitution resumed

DAMASCUS (2 August 2020): United Nations-brokered talks on writing a new Syrian constitution have [resumed](#) in Geneva. The negotiations, which are aimed at reaching a political settlement to the Syrian war via the constitution, are

probably a long shot to succeed and were [suspended](#) earlier this week after several attendees tested positive for the coronavirus. “Swiss authorities” have apparently decided that it’s safe to start again. –*Ahram, Al Monitor*

UAE launches its nuclear energy programme

DUBAI (3 August): With the successful startup of its Barakah nuclear energy plant, the UAE became the first Arab country to launch its own nuclear energy programme. It is a significant step towards its goal of emissions-free electricity. The UAE is the newest member of an exclusive club of 31 countries running nuclear power operations. It is also the first to launch a nuclear power plant in three decades after China (1990). The Barakah plant’s Unit 1 is the first of the UAE’s planned four reactors, which, when complete, are expected to meet 25 per cent of the country’s electricity needs with zero carbon emissions. [Mohamed Ibrahim Al Hammadi](#), CEO of Emirates Nuclear Energy Corp. said, “We are now another step closer to achieving our goal of supplying up to a quarter of our Nation’s electricity needs and powering its future growth with safe, reliable and emissions-free electricity.” Israel and Iran already have nuclear capabilities in the region. –*CNBC*

Saudi Arabia allowed use of its airspace for UAE-Israel flights

RIYADH (2 September 2020): Saudi Arabia allowed the use of its airspace for UAE-Israel flights and the move has been appreciated by the Israeli PM

[Netanyahu](#). The Saudi Press Agency said that the country’s civil aviation authority had granted Abu Dhabi’s request to allow airliners “coming from and departing to all countries” and bound for or leaving one of the UAE’s airports, to fly over Saudi Arabia. In 2018, the Kingdom had permitted Tel Aviv bound Air India to use its airspace. [Netanyahu](#) welcomed the move and called it the benefits of a genuine peace. In a video statement, he added that flying over Saudi airspace will help develop tourism, lower the costs of flights and cut travel time to East Asia. However, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud said that the Kingdom’s decision to allow flights doesn’t change its position on the Palestinian issue. – *Haaretz, The Jerusalem Post*

Kuwait Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Sabah passes away

KUWAIT CITY (29 September): Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah AlSabah passed away at the age of 91 after undergoing treatment in the US since July. His [office announced](#), “With the utmost sadness and grief for the Kuwaiti people, the Islamic and Arab world and people of friendly nations, the Emiri Diwan mourns the death of Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah.” The Emir had ruled the oil-rich Gulf Arab state since 2006 and had overseen its foreign policy for more than 50 years. The Kuwaiti Dinar fell against the US Dollar in the forward market and Kuwaiti stocks plunged, before the official announcement of the Emir’s death. Kuwait has sworn-in 83-

year old Crown Prince [Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad AlSabah](#) as the new leader. Condolences poured in from around the region as Kuwait declared an [official mourning](#) for a period of 40 days and the closure of official departments for a period of 3 days. India is to observe one-day state mourning on the demise of the Emir, as Prime Minister [Modi](#) described him as a beloved leader of the Arab world and a close friend of India and said that the late leader played a leading role in strengthening bilateral relations and always took special care of the Indian community in Kuwait. – *Khaleej Times, Al Jazeera, Gulf News, Hindustan Times*

ECONOMIC

Saudi ARAMCO income falls by 50 per cent

RIYADH (9 August): Saudi oil giant ARAMCO's net income plunged by 50 per cent and amounted to US\$23.2 billion in the first six months of 2020. In the same period in 2019 the net income was US\$ 46.9 billion. The financial results for the second quarter reflect the biggest shock to global energy markets in decades. Total free cash flow at the ARAMCO came in at US\$21.1 billion for the first half, down from US\$38 billion the year before. ARAMCO President and CEO [Amin Nasser](#) said that strong headwinds from reduced demand and lower oil prices are reflected in ARAMCO's second quarter results. In December 2019, ARAMCO went public and has taken measures to build transparency. Earlier, ARAMCO ceded its title as the

world's largest listed company by market capitalization to Apple.

ARAMCO's CEO also said that the company is moving ahead with plans to [boost crude output](#) capacity despite cuts in capex this year and the next. ARAMCO discovered two new oil and gas fields in the northern region. Saudi energy minister [Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud](#) mentioned that the oil giant will carry on with its efforts to estimate the total amount of oil and gas in the Abraq Al Toloul oil field and the Hadabat Al Hajara gas field, and is drilling more wells to determine their areas and capacities. -CNBC, *Hart Energy*, Reuters

Lebanese Pound is the most under-valued currency in the world

BEIRUT (12 September 2020): Amid political and economic chaos, the Lebanese Pound further [dropped](#) against the US Dollar on the black market, becoming the world's most under-valued currency. The new rate of between LBP/\$8,600-LBP/\$8,750 means the currency has lost 81 per cent of its value in the past year since banks began restricting withdrawals of Dollars. The government still officially maintains the level even as the Pound collapses and banks halt all Dollar withdrawals, except for what are called "fresh" transfers of Dollars from overseas.–*Saudi Gazette*

US sanctions cost Iran's economy US\$ 150 billion

TEHRAN (26 September 2020): Iran lost US\$150 billion of revenue since US President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions on its economy. The US measures are also hampering imports of medical and food supplies. Iran's economy has shrunk over the past two years, inflation and unemployment are rising. Crude exports that the nation depends on for most of its foreign exchange, are less than 10 per cent of their level before the US withdrew from the multilateral agreement in May 2018. –*Gulf News*

Syrian economy continues to struggle as sanctions bite, shortages hit

DAMASCUS (08 September, 2020): As the Syrian Pound dropped to a [new low](#) (-2,250 pounds for purchase and 2,280 pounds for sale), a decrease of 1.3 per cent from the prices, while the price of basic goods continued to skyrocket, pro-regime circles scurried to attribute blame for the country's recent [economic woes](#). It is reported that the bakeries across the country are running out of flour for bread and fuel stations are running out of petrol. As [bakeries](#) in Syria struggle to continue to produce bread to feed a hungry population, the government of President Bashar al-Assad is reportedly scrambling to keep supply chains going in the face of a major wheat shortage.

The Syrian President has [appointed](#) Prime Minister Hussein Arnous and

asked him to form a new government as the country continues to suffer from a severe economic crisis and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. –*Al Khaleej Today, Al Araby, VOA News, Middle East Monitor*

DEFENCE and SECURITY

US to upgrade Qatar to a non-NATO ally

WASHINGTON (17 September 2020): US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arabian Gulf Affairs [Timothy Lenderking](#) said that the Trump administration is hoping to upgrade its partnership with Qatar to the status of a major non-NATO ally. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Qatar Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani met in Washington a week earlier. Currently, 17 countries including Gulf Arab states Kuwait and Bahrain enjoy the major non-NATO ally status with the US. The status gives a country preferential access to US military equipment and technology, including free surplus material, expedited export processing and prioritized cooperation on training. The move aims to achieve a strong front against Iran as it intends to mend the rift between Qatar and the quartet of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Secondly, it also intends to test waters for a probable Israel-Qatar deal. –*Al Jazeera*

Series of explosions in Iran

TEHRAN (23 June 2020): There was another minor catastrophe at an

[Iranian](#) facility. This is the third incident in a week. This time it appears there was a mysterious fire at Iran's uranium enrichment facility in Natanz, which follows a mysterious explosion at a missile production facility outside of Tehran and another mysterious explosion at what's been described as a medical clinic in northern Iran. Unlike the previous two incidents (26 and 30 June), after this one, Iranian state media seemed to leave open the possibility that the fire was the result of sabotage perpetrated by Israel and/or the United States. Natanz has also been the target of sabotage in the past. Iran said that it was [building](#) a new underground facility to research advanced centrifuge technologies near its current centrifuge facility at Natanz. Iranian officials claim that the fire only struck a storage area, but there are reportedly indications from satellite imagery that it may have hit a more sensitive area, possibly one involved in the production of advanced centrifuges. –*Iran Primer, Asharq Al Awsat*

Lebanese security forces arrest Islamic State-linked 'terror cell'

BEIRUT (5 September, 2020): Lebanon's army had arrested a "terror cell" linked to Islamic State (IS) on 5 September, 2020. By giving reference to a [military statement](#), *Anadolu Agency* reported that the cell was preparing to launch a terror strike inside Lebanon. The leader of the cell is said to be Khaled Al Talawy. According to security forces, his car was used in a shootout that took the lives of three

people on August 21, 2020. According to the statement, the cell members were arrested in security operations in northern and central Lebanon. – *Anadolu Agency*

Massive blast in Beirut kill more than 190; sparks nation-wide protest in Lebanon

BEIRUT (4 August, 2020): A massive blast shocked the Beirut port in Lebanon killing at least 190 people and injuring 6,500. According to Beirut Governor Marwan Abboud, the blast temporarily displaced 300,000 people and caused an estimated loss of US\$ 10-15 billion. After the blast the government declared a two-week state of emergency. [The blast sparked a nationwide protest](#) against the government for its failure in averting the disaster which resulted in the resignation by the Prime Minister Hassan Diab on 10 August, 2020. Later, in a rushed process prior to French President Emmanuel Macron's visit, the [Lebanese president invited Mustafa Adib](#) to form a new government on 31 August, 2020. –*Al Jazeera and Ha'aretz*

Israel Sends reinforcement to Northern Borders amid Hezbollah threat

TEL AVIV (23 July, 2020): The Israel Defence Forces decided to send reinforcements to the borders with Lebanon amid the threat of retaliation from Hezbollah over the death of one of its fighters (Ali Kamel Mohsen Jawad) in Syria earlier this month. "In light of a situational assessment that was held in

the IDF, it was decided [to send a pinpoint reinforcement of infantry troops to the Northern Command,](#)” the military said. The reinforcement comprised the 13th battalion of the Golani Brigade and a small number of additional troops. In the last few months, significant increase in tension has been registered between Israel and Lebanon which has created a possibility of escalation especially after Israel’s strikes on Hezbollah outposts which were facilitating border crossings of terrorists in Israel. – *The Times of Israel*

US military to test Israeli drone system for intercepting drones

TEL AVIV (8 September, 2020): According to Israel's Ministry of Defence, [the U.S. military has initiated a new](#) pilot project to test an Israeli-made drone system for intercepting drones. The Skylord drone system, produced by the Israeli company Xtend, is designed to protect troops from "various inbound aerial threats, particularly drones," the ministry said in a statement. The system allows drones to be controlled remotely using virtual and augmented reality. Currently, IDF has been using the system to intercept balloons attached with incendiary materials flown by the militants in the Gaza Strip. –*Ha'aretz*

Hamas targets Southern Israel after Abraham Accord signing ceremony

GAZA (15 September, 2020): Multiple rockets were launched in Southern Israel from the Gaza Strip immediately

after Israel-Bahrain-UAE-US inked a peace deal at Washington DC. According to the IDF, “13 rocket launches were identified, of which 8 were successfully [intercepted by the Iron Dome defense system](#)”. In retaliation, the Israeli army targeted Hamas’ military positions in northern and central Gaza. The tensions between Hamas and Israel have significantly increased since Israel has signed the peace agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. – *Haaretz*

OPCW condemns use of chemical weapons by Syrian government

DAMASCUS (9 July, 2020): The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons’ (OPCW) executive council [voted overwhelmingly](#) to “condemn” the Syrian government for using sarin and chlorine gas in an attack on the town of Ltamenah in March 2017. The OPCW gave Syria 90 days to fully declare its remaining chemical weapons stockpiles, something Damascus, which denies using chemical munitions in Ltamenah, says it did years ago. If the Syrian government fails to respond, the OPCW will probably refer the case to the United Nations Security Council. – *Arms Control Today*

Bagdad and Erbil agree on security matters

BAGHDAD (18 August, 2020): Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government officials have apparently come to an [accord](#) creating several joint operations commands in provinces across central Iraq where the Islamic

State has been active recently. Ever since the Iraqi army moved against the KRG around Kirkuk in 2017, there have been major gaps both physically and in terms of coordination between their security forces, and IS has been the beneficiary. This agreement may help to tighten things up. *Musings on Iraq*

US announces withdrawal of troops from Iraq, eyes prospects of oil deal

WASHINGTON (20 August, 2020): US President Donald Trump [hosted](#) Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi at the White House and reiterated his goal of fully withdrawing US military forces from Iraq. Earlier this year, the Iraqi parliament urged the US to withdraw its forces from Iraq. Though it was a non-binding vote and the Iraqi government has never taken steps to implement it, partly because at the time Trump threatened sanctions if they did. –*Arab News*

US warns Iraq of Baghdad embassy closure if attacks continue

BAGHDAD (29 September 2020): The Trump administration has conveyed the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi that it will [close](#) the US embassy in Baghdad unless his government puts an end to rocket attacks targeting that and other US-related facilities, likely perpetrated by Iranian-aligned militias. The warning came before word of [another rocket](#) attack near Baghdad's airport on 29 September, which killed at least six civilians. It is unusual for these

(alleged) militia attacks to target or even risk targeting civilians. The administration said it was “outraged” by the attack. Kadhimi [seems](#) to believe it, or at least he's acting like he believes it. He is talking about creating a [special security force](#) for Baghdad's Green Zone, where the embassy is located, and appears to be [threatening the militias](#) with economic and military retaliation in an attempt to bring them under tighter state control, but whether he can succeed is anybody's guess. – *TRT World, Mohave Daily, Iraqi Files, Al Arabiya, Musing on Iraq*

INDIA and the REGION

India sends emergency aid to Lebanon

NEW DELHI (14 August, 2020): India sent 58 tonnes of emergency humanitarian aid to Lebanon in order to help the people of Lebanon in overcoming the damage caused by the explosions in Beirut on 4 August. During briefings about humanitarian aid, the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, Anurag Srivastava, said “we had offered our assistance to Lebanon and sought from them an assessment of their requirement. Based on this, an Indian Air Force C-17 aircraft was deployed to deliver 58 MT of emergency humanitarian aid [on behalf of the Government of India to Lebanon](#)”. The Indian aid comprised emergency medical supplies, wheat flour, sugar, pulses, and relief materials such as blankets, dignity kits and sleeping mats, which Lebanon desperately needed in light of the large

number of people left homeless by the explosion. – *The Hindustan Times*

Israel AI-based technologies to help tackle COVID-19

NEW DELHI (12 August, 2020): As a part of Israel-India cooperation to fight the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the All India Institute for Medical Sciences (AIIMS) has received AI- [based state-of-the-art technologies](#) and high-end equipment from Israel. The high-end equipment and technology solutions were formally handed over to AIIMS by the Ambassador of Israel to India, Ron Malka. The technologies included a 12-hour disinfection product called CPD, [non-invasive remote patient monitoring system](#), an AI-based software which is for Ultrasound use and an app that can be installed on any mobile phone by hospital staff and makes the work of the hospital staff effective and easier. While handing over the equipment and technologies to AIIMS, Malka said “We are pleased to share the best medical technology solutions from Israel with the most premier medical institute of India. We are confident that these technologies will further [bolster their capabilities to tackle Covid-19](#)”. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has deepened the ties between the two nations. – *The Hindustan Times*, *Jagran Josh* and Government of Israel

India and Israel sign cultural agreement

NEW DELHI (20 August, 2020): India inked a cultural agreement with Israel which covers a three-year programme of cooperation to further strengthen

their strategic bilateral relations by promoting [greater people-to-people exchange](#). The Agreement was signed at the Israeli Foreign Ministry between Israel’s Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and India’s Ambassador to Israel, Sanjeev Singla. The agreement states that “Both sides are convinced that this cooperation shall contribute to the development of their relations and to raising awareness, particularly among youth, of the history and culture of the people of both countries. They also agreed to promote cooperation in order to improve and strengthen mutual understanding and friendship between the two countries.” - *PTI* and *Financial Express*

India and UAE held 13th Joint Commission Meeting

NEW DELHI (17 August 2020): India and the UAE held the [13th session of the Joint Commission Meeting](#) on trade, economic and technical cooperation and the meeting was co-chaired by Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The two sides held wide-ranging discussions on a number of issues and expressed satisfaction over the sustenance of momentum in the bilateral relations in various areas for mutual benefit under the aegis of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The two countries welcomed the close cooperation in the fight against the COVID-19 and discussed a joint strategy to offset the economic and social impact of the pandemic. India

invited further investments from the UAE in key sectors of the Indian economy while the UAE appreciated the significant contributions made by the Indian expatriate community and expressed its willingness to further strengthen links in energy and food security.– *MEA*

Indian Defence and External Affairs ministers visit Iran

TEHRAN (9 September 2020): India's defence minister Rajnath Singh met with his Iranian counterpart Brigadier General Amir Hatami in Iran. They discussed ways to bolster bilateral cooperation and exchanged views on regional security issues, including the situation in Afghanistan. Two days later, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and discussed the Chabahar Port project and the situation in Afghanistan. The visit comes in the backdrop of strained ties between the US and Iran, and China trying to grab the strategic space in sanctions-hit Iran. India is committed to the Chabahar project; India has allocated Rs 100 crores for the project in this year's Budget. The allocation of the

funding signals India's desire and commitment to be part of the project. – *Indian Express, The Print*

India-Turkey spat over Kashmir issue

NEW DELHI (22 September 2020): The Indian government claims that Turkey is recruiting Kashmiri journalists as part of its well-planned conspiracy to malign India's image internationally on the Kashmir issue. In the last few years a large number of Pakistani journalists have been hired by Turkish media on Erdogan's instructions, to capitalize on extremism in domestic politics and to advance the propagation of political Islam to the world. Prior to that, India slammed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his remarks on Kashmir during the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session, saying the latter's speech constitutes "gross interference" in India's internal affairs and is "completely unacceptable". –*Zee News, NDTV*

(Prepared by Dr. Lakshmi Priya, Ms. Nagapushpa Devendra and Mr. Jatin Kumar)