



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



WEST ASIA REVIEW

APRIL 2025

Author

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Volume II, Issue 4



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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Cover Image:

Oman's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi bilaterally meeting the US Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff prior to hosting the US-Iran talks, on April 12, 2025. Source: [Foreign Ministry of Oman](#)

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meeting Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman, in Tehran, on April 17, 2025. Source: [The Office of the Supreme Leader](#)

Syria's Interim President Ahmad Al-Sharaa and Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia' Al-Sudani held their first meeting, under the auspices of Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on April 18, 2025. Source: [Iraqi State Media](#)

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West Asia Review

by

Amb. Gaddam Dharmendra

Overview

Pursuant to the exchange of letters in March between US President Donald Trump and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the **US and Iran** commenced their much anticipated "indirect" talks. These were held in Muscat and Rome and were mediated by Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi. Ahead of the start of the talks, **Israeli** Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in Washington DC, his second visit in under two months. During their subsequent joint press conference, Trump reiterated that he prefers a nuclear deal with Iran over any military action.

Against this backdrop, regional diplomacy in West Asia and the Levant went into high gear. The **White House** announced that President Trump would be visiting Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar from May 13th-16th. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi kept up a brisk pace, reaching out telephonically to brief counterparts in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) and paying back-to-back visits to Moscow and Beijing. **Saudi Arabia's** Defense Minister, Prince Khaled bin Salman was in Tehran, the first high level visit from the Saudis to Iran in over two decades. **Egypt's** President Sisi was in Doha which also separately hosted an unannounced meeting between Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa and the Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani.

Iran's Shahid Rajaei Port in Bandar Abbas was rocked by a devastating explosion. Iranian authorities said the explosion was caused by the wrongful storage of a shipment of chemicals. Reports are that the containers were of sodium perchlorate, a chemical precursor used in the manufacture of solid fuel propellant for ballistic missiles. The highly combustible chemical originated from **China**. In **Yemen**, the US continued its bombing of Houthi positions. The Houthis, however, remained undeterred, showing their ability to absorb US airstrikes and repeatedly launching counterattacks on US naval assets in the region.

Syria was gripped by sectarian violence, triggering fears of a renewed civil war. Cadres of interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa backed "Hayat Tahrir Al Shams" (HTS) attacked the minority Alawites to Syria's east and Druze Christians to the

south. Questions are being raised of Sharaa's control over the HTS and of infiltration by jihadis reported to be masking their allegiance to al Qaeda/ISIS. Amidst these internal tensions, Syria also emerged as an arena for Israel-Turkish rivalry. There was no improvement in the situation in **Gaza** with the Hamas and Israel deadlocked on the release of the remaining Israeli hostages. In **Lebanon**, the government of President Joseph Aoun embarked on an unprecedented move to try and disarm Hezbollah cadres and limit their influence. The **Egyptian and Chinese** air forces held joint air exercises over Egyptian air space, the first ever between the two countries.

Developments

Saudi Arabia and India: Prime Minister Narendra Modi cut short a bilateral visit to Riyadh following the deadly terror attacks in **Pahalgam in India's Jammu and Kashmir** (April 22nd). The terrorists shot dead 26 tourists, separating them on the basis of their religion. In the wake of this deadly incident, reactions across the OIC countries were varied. The Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jassim Al Budaiwi, condemned the incident as did the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Qatar adopted a cautious approach, seeking to balance its growing engagement with India and its traditional religion based bond with Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi briefed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (April 22nd), King Abdallah of Jordan (April 24th), President al-Sisi of Egypt (April 24th) and President Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian of Iran (April 26th). External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar also engaged his counterparts in Saudi Arabia (April 24th), Egypt (April 26th) and Kuwait (April 30th).

US and Iran held two rounds of "indirect" talks and one round of "technical level" discussions (April 12th and 26th in Muscat, and April 20th in Rome). At the outset, Iran successfully managed to set the terms of the discussions to which the US acquiesced, i.e., Iran's pre-conditions were that talks be held in "indirect" format; the agenda would be restricted only to nuclear issues and exclude Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional role; and, Oman would be the mediator, instead of the known US preference for the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Despite public expressions of optimism by US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, the initial rounds, however, failed to clarify some vital aspects of the discussions. Araghchi summed up the situation as it stood at the end of the third round of talks: "Today we exchanged written Q&A. Some differences are serious, some less so. Our movement has been good so far

and we're satisfied with the process. Both sides are serious. I'm hopeful about a deal, but cautious. We're now moving from generalities to more technical issues.” (@araghchi, April 27th)

Looming in the background is President Trump's two-month deadline to conclude the discussions. To circumvent this deadline, Iran proposed an interim deal, but there were no takers for the Iranian proposal. Throughout these deliberations, Iran demonstrated nimble diplomacy. Soon after the first round in Oman, Araghchi quickly initiated telecon briefings to counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq and Egypt. In turn, Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia issued statements of support for the US-Iran talks and commended Oman's mediation. Araghchi also visited Moscow for a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (April 17th) and later to Beijing to meet Foreign Minister Wang Yi (April 23rd).

On the other hand, and quite notably, the US made no effort to include either the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) or the IAEA in the talks. There remained some confusion on the US side. First, with regards to what exactly are the US' "asks" from the Iranians and, second, who speaks for the Trump Administration. At the heart of this confusion was US position on Iran's right to uranium enrichment, one on which significant internal divisions came to the fore within the Administration. National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, who has since been removed by Trump from his position, called for the total dismantlement of Iran's nuclear enrichment program and zero enrichment, a position later echoed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. However, the US' lead negotiator and Trump's Middle East Special Envoy, Steve Witkoff, took a more compromising position, of permitting limited enrichment by Iran, restricted to 3.67% of enriched uranium. Witkoff's position apparently has the backing of Vice President J.D. Vance who is similarly keen on a deal.

On the other hand, Iran has for long maintained that its right to enrichment is non-negotiable and that this is a red line. Foreign Minister Araghchi later and quite cleverly summed up the situation, declaring: "We see contradictory & conflicting messages from the US in the news & media. Many differences exist [in the US]."

The fourth round of US-Iran talks due to be held in Muscat on April 27th has been indefinitely postponed. Overall, and compared to the mood at the start of the talks in Muscat, the tone on both sides has become progressively more wary, and

perhaps even less optimistic. Typically, the Iranians were better prepared and doggedly stuck to their brief whereas the Americans spoke in different voices.

Meanwhile, a team from the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** arrived in Tehran (beginning April 28th). Iran's MFA announced that the visit was for meetings with Iran's specialists on safeguards and other technical issues. Separately, Director General-IAEA, Rafael Grossi, reiterated the Agency's well-known concern over the advances made by Iran's nuclear programme. In an interview to US News (April 30th, [usnews.com](https://www.usnews.com)), Grossi supported the ongoing US-Iran discussions but proffered that the IAEA should be included in these discussions as it is the sole technical agency qualified to undertake verifications of any deal. Grossi has been maintaining that "Without us, any agreement on Iran is just a piece of paper." He has also said that Iran's uranium enrichment level of up to 60% is a "situation (that) is worsening as time passes because you may be not doing anything diplomatically and politically, but the centrifuges keep spinning and the stockpile keeps growing."

The **US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC)** imposed another round of sanctions on Iran and China (April 29th). The OFAC designated six entities and six individuals in both countries "for their role in a network procuring ballistic missile propellant ingredients on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This network has facilitated the procurement of sodium perchlorate and dioctyl sebacate from the PRC to Iran" (details of OFAC's press release is at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0116>). Both chemicals are used in the manufacture of solid fuel for ballistic missiles.

Just days before the OFAC designations, a massive explosion caused extensive damage to Iran's Shahid Rajaei port at Bandar Abbas (on April 26th). The explosion was said to have been caused by the improper storage and possible mishandling of sodium perchlorate. The chemical was exported from China. However, Iran's Ministry of Defence denied (April 27th) the presence of any such explosive chemicals, saying "There were no imported/exported military-related cargoes in Shahid Rajaei Port, as suggested by our investigation and documentation. Any reports about missile components [such as the rumour of Chinese cargo] being the cause of fire is solely foreign media creating a chain of hype about it, it's bogus."

The massive explosion and the extensive damage to the port quickly disproved the Defense Ministry's statement. Its intensity was such that buildings two kilometres away were damaged. Official reports put the estimated number of dead at 70 while the unofficial number is of over 250 dead. The financial loss in damages is estimated to be at least US\$ 3 billion. Accusations of wilful misdeclaration of the cargo manifest and its improper handling were levelled mainly at Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The IRGC oversees the country's strategic missile program and is a strong advocate of closer ties with China. In fact, the IRGC Navy operates its own dedicated naval port nearby and questions were asked as to why the dangerous military consignment was not unloaded at that site. Port operations were temporarily suspended, bringing to a halt all imports and exports at Shahid Rajaei port which handles roughly 80% of Iran's container/shipping cargo.

Israel typically emerged as a suspect within Iran with some pointing to a possible sabotage. Though this remains unconfirmed, one analyst pointed to multiple explosions at three separate locations of the port, i.e., a main blast at a storage depot, a second at a container facility and a third at a warehouse (according to @SinaToosi). Additionally, aerial footage of the incident also showed three separate explosions. An Israeli official however denied the accusations (Israel's Channel 12 news).

Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister, Prince Khaled bin Salman was in Tehran (April 17th). Prince Khaled is the younger brother of Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. During the visit, Prince Khaled called on Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Masoud Pezeshkian. He delivered a letter from Saudi King Salman to Khamenei. Prince Khaled tweeted "I delivered a letter from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and conveyed the leadership's greetings. We discussed bilateral relations and topics of mutual interest." According to reports, the discussions covered four main areas viz. Yemen, Palestine, bilateral security and the ongoing Iran-US dialogue. Prince Khaled's other meetings included his counterpart, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of Iran's armed forces and, Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Perhaps, the most under reported aspect of the visit was the inclusion in Prince Khaled's delegation of the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jabir.

Prince Khaled's visit marks the first ever high level visit from Saudi Arabia to Iran since the Iranian revolution of 1979, following which ties were badly strained

between the neighbours. The primary driver of tensions was their competition in seeking to exert ideological influence across the Muslim umma. This compelled each country to resort to increasingly radical approaches. As such Prince Khaled's visit is widely considered as historic. Equally, the timing is of strategic significance, given US President Trump's repeated threats that Iran's failure to conclude a deal with the US could lead to escalation, including potential US military strikes on Iran. In turn, Iran has threatened to strike back at US bases in the region. It may be recalled that in September 2019, two Saudi Aramco oil terminals in Saudi Arabia were struck by Iranian drones. Iran's denials of any role in that incident have not been convincing.

Coinciding with Prince Khaled's visit to Tehran, the **Saudis** launched a series of bombing raids on **Yemen's Houthis** in the Saada region of Yemen (April 16th). The US also persisted with its bombing of Houthi positions, estimated to be over 36 bombing raids, with some 20 straight days of bombings, from its carrier strike groups stationed in the Middle East. The Houthis, however, appeared to be quite undeterred as they continued to shoot down several US MQ-9 Reaper drones. Shipping in the Red Sea remained effected as Houthi missiles targeted US naval vessels and Israel.

In the **Levant**, the situation in both Lebanon and Syria continues to remain fluid. **Lebanon** received the **US** deputy Special Envoy for Middle East, Morgan Ortagus, who held a series of meetings in Beirut (April 5th). Her meetings included with President Joseph Aoun, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and parliament speaker Nabih Berri. The focus was on disarming Hezbollah militias, a consistent US demand. The US is demanding a credible time table as it considers this to be a critical step towards a durable and long term political stability in Lebanon.

In Washington DC, the State Department's spokeswoman Tammy Bruce reiterated the urgency of disarming the Hezbollah, saying, "As part of the cessation of hostilities agreement, the government of Lebanon is responsible for disarming Hezbollah, and we expect the Lebanese armed forces to disarm these terrorists to prevent further hostilities." (April 5th, Al Monitor).

The **Syrian** regime of interim President Ahmed al-Shaara arrested Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) Syria operations chief Khaled Khaled and several other PIJ leaders. The crackdown on PIJ and pro-Hamas non-state actors was apparently a US precondition for easing sanctions on Syria (April 22nd, @Charles_Lister). However, sectarian violence continued in various parts of Syria, particularly

against the Alawites to the east and the Druze Christians to the south. The Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri said that the Syrian regime was condoning a "genocidal attack" on the Druze. Reports are that the sectarian clashes have left 101 dead, mostly Druze Christians.

In support of the Druze, Israel has been conducting military operations in Suwayda, the Druze majority province. Israel, however, also made known its intentions to put in place a buffer zone inside Syrian territory. This has been publicly condemned by the interim Syrian government, but privately it appears to let Israel manage the southern borders which have for long been a land-route for Iran's supplies of armaments to the Lebanese Hezbollah and to Syria. To the north, Turkey, which was one of the earliest backers of the Syrian regime of al-Sharaa, entered into fresh tensions with Israel, but both sides are reported to also be seeking a deconfliction between their respective forces (April 19th, Al Monitor).

Two US Republican Congressmen, Cory Mills and Marlin Stutzman, were in Damascus on an unofficial visit (April 18th) and were instrumental in securing an invitation for a visit to the US by Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani (April 19th, syriaweekly.com)

Iraq and Syria held their first meeting since the fall of Assad regime. In what is being reported as a carefully "orchestrated encounter", Syria's al-Sharaa and Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani met in Doha. Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Al Thani is credited for bringing the two sides together (April 18th, amwaj.media). Sharaa and Sudani are said to have held "comprehensive discussions" covering regional security, border controls and counter-terrorism. Sharaa has been invited to attend an Arab League summit due to be held in Baghdad in May. This is an interesting development, given Iraq's traditional ties to Iran, and could be a portend of further regional realignments. Pro-Iranian leaders in Iraq were critical of the Sharaa-Sudani meeting, given Sharaa's old links with Al-Qaeda and ISIS both of which consider the Shiaa faith as Taqfiri (or apostate).

Egypt and China held joint air-force training exercises (running from mid-April to early May). The exercises came within a week of the visit to Egypt by French President Emmanuel Macron. These first ever air exercises between the two countries have been dubbed as "Eagles of Civilization 2025". According to China's Ministry of National Defense, the joint air exercises are aimed at "promoting pragmatic cooperation and enhancing mutual trust and friendship between the two militaries." (April 16th, Al Monitor). The Al Monitor news portal reported that

Egypt is also interested in purchasing China's J-10 fighter jets and quoted an October report by the London based Chatham House that "Egypt's desire for Chinese military hardware stems in part from Cairo viewing the US commitment to upholding Israel's qualitative military edge in the region as a 'strategic vulnerability.'" However, there also remain substantial differences between China and Egypt, particularly over the participation of Chinese construction companies in Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam project on the Nile. Egypt is also apparently unhappy with China's failure to criticize Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea – Bab-al-Mandab straits. The latter disruption is leading to a significant loss in revenues to Egypt, estimated to be US\$ 7 billion in 2024, due to a drastic slow-down of commercial shipping via the Suez Canal.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi paid a bilateral visit to Doha (April 13th-14th). On arrival, Sisi was welcomed by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The two sides announced Qatari investment plans. According to Egypt's State Information Service, the focus of discussions covered developments in Syria, Sudan and Lebanon, as also developments in Gaza between Hamas and Israel.

The **International Court of Justice** (ICJ) opened a week of hearings on Israel and its humanitarian obligations to permit aid to Gaza (April 26th). The hearings are taking place pursuant to a Norwegian sponsored resolution at the UN General Assembly in December 2024. The resolution has sought the ICJ's opinion on the legality of Israeli actions in suspending humanitarian aid to Gaza. Israel has been seeking the release of the remaining 58 hostages being held now for over nearly two years by Hamas militias. Israel also resumed its bombing of Hamas targets in Gaza.



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