



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Author

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Cover Image:

US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met in Washington, D.C. on February 4, 2025.

Source: [Official X Handle/Prime Minister of Israel](#)

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman received Syria's Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa in Riyadh on February 2, 2025. Source: [Official X Handle/Saudi Foreign Ministry](#)

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani in New Delhi on February 17, 2025. Source: [Official X Handle/Narendra Modi](#)

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West Asia Review

by

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Overview

Amidst the continuing fluid situation in West Asia and the Levant, the United State's policy of "Maximum Pressure" on Iran returned. President Donald Trump signed a "National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-2" hours ahead of his meeting at the White House with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on February 4. Prospects for resumption of talks on the Iran Nuclear issue dimmed immediately. The twin ceasefires in Lebanon and Gaza remain tenuous but continue to hold, given ongoing tensions in the Levant. Multiple bomb explosions took place in a suspected terror attack around Tel Aviv, ahead of the start of Phase-2 of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire that was set to begin on March 1. Foreign Ministers of Arab states met in Riyadh and issued a statement rejecting President Trump's suggestion to move Palestinians out of Gaza. Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Shara undertook back-to-back visits to Riyadh and Ankara. Both visits were high on symbolism but yielded little of substance. The situation in Syria and Lebanon remains fluid.

While signing the **National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-2**, Trump appeared to undercut his own decision, saying "This is what I am torn (about). Everybody wants me to sign it...I'll do that...it's very tough." Trump later said on Fox News that "I would prefer that not happen (bombing Iran)... I'd much rather see a deal with Iran...There's two ways of stopping them: with bombs or with a written piece of paper."

This contradictory signalling indicates Trump's preference for a diplomatic solution to a challenge that continues from his first term, while leaving all options on the table. In general, this time around, "maximum pressure" could be on paper but with weaker implementation, designed primarily to push Iran into negotiations. The alternatives for Iran are clearly listed out in the NSPM-2, and indicate that Trump has multiple options and is quite prepared to tighten the screws with a view to compelling Iran to review its programme. Nevertheless, the NSMP's release comes against the background of the fact that Iran and the EU3 have held three rounds of preliminary talks, the last round of which was in Geneva

in January this year. There was optimism on all sides that these talks would lead to further wide ranging discussions involving the US.

Briefly, the NSPM-2 repeats long-standing US assessments, inter alia of the destabilising role across the region by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its so-called Axis of Resistance. Iran's nuclear programme is seen to pose an "existential danger to the United States and the entire civilized world", and the document reiterates the consistent position of successive US administrations that Iran "can never be allowed to acquire or develop nuclear weapons, or to extort the United States or its allies through the threat of nuclear weapons acquisition, development, or use".

A series of directives are listed in the section "Enacting Maximum Pressure". These, inter alia, call for implementation of a "robust and continual sanctions enforcement campaign with respect to Iran that denies the regime and its terror proxies access to revenue." Of interest will be the NSPM-2's directive to impose and enforce "additional sanctions" on "shipping, insurance, and port operators". This targets Iran's oil exports to China, its off-shore financial operations including in the UAE, and the Chabahar Port.

India will also be directly affected due to its operations in Iran's Chabahar Port. In May last year, India and Iran concluded a 10-year contract under which India would develop and operate the strategic port located off the Hormuz Strait choke-point. The US had waived sanctions on Chabahar in 2019 but these were reinstated in April 2024 by the Biden Administration, following Iran's unprecedented attack on Israel. The latest Trump directive per the NSMP-2 would further slow-down the port's development and affect India's management and operations.

India's approach in Chabahar is dual-tracked, namely to strengthen bilateral relations with Iran while further drawing in the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan by assuring them of their trade and supply-chain resilience. In this schema, Chabahar would tie up with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). In recent years, Chabahar had emerged as a viable alternative to the China promoted Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which has become entangled in the instability in its Baluchistan province and in Afghanistan.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in Washington DC (Feb. 3-6), a visit which neatly coincided with Trump's decision to renew maximum pressure on Iran. In addition to a meeting with Trump (on Feb. 4), Netanyahu held a series

of meetings with top Administration officials including Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. He also met several Congressional leaders. In a clear boost to Netanyahu's domestic standing, the visit resulted in securing the resumption of US arms supplies to Israel and a more bullish US administration approach towards Iran, while publicly supporting Israel's positions across the Levant, especially in Gaza.

The close US-Israel ties were further reinforced by the subsequent visit to Israel of Secretary of State Marco Rubio (Feb. 16). Iran once again figured prominently. In a press briefing, Netanyahu declared: "Over the last 16 months, Israel has dealt a mighty blow to Iran's terror axis. Under the strong leadership of President Trump and with your unflinching support, I have no doubt that we can and will finish the job."

Rubio also reiterated the shared positions of both countries, saying that Iran is "the single greatest source of instability in the region. Behind every terrorist group, behind every act of violence, behind every destabilizing activity, behind everything that threatens peace and stability for the millions of people who call this region home, is Iran. And by Iran I mean the ayatollahs. By Iran I mean its regime – a regime, by the way, its people don't support. The people of Iran are victims of that regime."

Rubio's remarks on Syria were of particular interest: "On the broader issues that we discussed as well is the questions in Syria. And while the fall of Assad is certainly promising and important, Syria replacing one destabilizing force for another is not a positive development. And that is something that we will watch very carefully as we seek to craft our own strategy with regards to how to approach the events in Syria."¹

Rubio's statement came against the backdrop that earlier in the month, Syria's interim president Ahmed al Sharaa had received a warm welcome in Riyadh (Feb. 2), his first overseas visit since triggering the downfall of the decades old Assad regime. In their meeting, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman assured Sharaa of extending support for Syria's reconstruction. More importantly, Sharaa's

¹ "Secretary of State Marco Rubio And Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu", [US Department of State](#), February 16, 2025

visit to Riyadh marked Syria's pivot away from Iran's influence and underlined the continuing strategic shifts underway in West Asia.

Thereafter, Sharaa was in Ankara (Feb. 4) during which he had a one-on-one meeting with President Erdogan. Delegation level talks included discussions on economic cooperation, support for reconstruction and return of Syrian refugees. Security issues figured prominently, especially Turkey's longstanding concerns over the Kurdish question. Exchanges included a potential joint defense agreement and Turkish bases in Syria. However, the Kurdish issue appears to have overshadowed Sharaa's visit.

No major agreements were announced in either Riyadh and Ankara, and Sharaa's first overseas visits were more in the nature of setting the stage for future cooperation.

Sharaa also held a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin (Feb. 12), the first since the fall of former President Bashar al-Assad in November last year. Assad has been granted asylum by Putin. A statement from the Kremlin posted on Telegram read, "Putin wished success to Ahmed al-Sharaa in solving the tasks facing the new leadership of the country." No reports are available whether the discussions included continued Russian presence and control over the air base in Latakia (Hmeimim) and its naval base in Tartous. Sharaa had previously declared that ties with Russia are of strategic importance for Syria.

In another sign of the ever shifting regional dynamic, the head of Türkiye's intelligence agency, İbrahim Kalın, was in Tehran (Feb. 9). Iran's Tasnim news agency reported that Kalın had met with his Iranian counterpart, Intelligence Minister "Hojjatoleslam" Syed Esmael Khatib. No other details of the visit were available, but the agenda for discussions is reported to have included Syria and the Kurdish issue.

Overall, the situation in Syria continues to be highly fluid as the country remains divided across multiple fissures, ethnic and strategic. Interim President Al-Sharra convened the first "dialogue session" of the National Dialogue Conference Preparatory Committee in Homs Province (Feb. 16). This was preparatory to drafting of a new constitution. Meanwhile, to the north and northwest, forces of the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) continued to clash with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the pro-Kurdish US backed forces.

Separately, Israel's Defence Minister Yisrael Katz revealed (Feb. 27) that Israel was determined to prevent Iran from rebuilding its presence in Syria by bringing in its regional proxies into the country. Katz also said that Israel cannot allow extremist groups on its borders "whether in Gaza, in the north, in Syria, or near the settlements of Judea and Samaria, and anywhere - and that is our policy." He declared that Southern Syria must be a demilitarized zone and that Israel would work closely with "our Druze friends" to achieve this objective (posted on X by Tel Aviv based security analyst @sfrantzman).

In Lebanon, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam formed a 24-member government that included five members of Hezbollah and its Amal allies. Amer Bisat, a BlackRock manager, was appointed as economy minister, tasked to oversee the country's reconstruction and recovery from its severe financial crisis.

Lebanon also observed a funeral ceremony for the assassinated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (Feb.23). The event became a show of force by the Hezbollah, an attempt to mask its much-diminished status. In attendance were delegations from the Axis of Resistance, mainly from Iran and Iraq. Iran was represented by Speaker of the Majlis, Bagher Qalibaf, and its entourage included Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi, officials from the Supreme Leader's office and the IRGC. Neither President Joseph Aoun nor Prime Minister Nawaf Salam participated, but instead delegated officials on their behalf.

At the elaborately staged ceremonies in Beirut, Nasrallah's successor Naim Qassem declared that Hezbollah would keep following Nasrallah's "path", dismissed the "tyrant America" and declared that "The resistance is not over, the resistance is still present and ready" to face Israel.

Over in Tehran, parallel ceremonies were held presided over by President Masoud Pezeshkian. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rallied the masses by vowing to continue the "resistance" against Israel. He praised Nasrallah as "a great mujahid (fighter) and prominent leader" and Safieddine as "a close confidant and an inseparable part of the leadership". (AFP)

Israeli airforce jets made a low pass over the funeral congregations. Foreign Minister Aragchi posted on X @aragchi, "I also witnessed, with my own eyes, the violation of Lebanon's sovereignty by Israeli jets that flew close above our heads, in a pitiful attempt to terrify people who gathered only to mourn. If that is not an act of terror, then what is? The violation only emboldened people in the stadium to shout against Israel even stronger and louder. Israelis never learn their lesson."

In Gaza, the first phase of the six-week ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the exchange of hostages continued amidst high emotions and bitter acrimony. Hamas' elaborately staged shows while releasing Israeli hostages and coffins of deceased hostages, came in for widespread criticism. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres posted on X (Feb. 21) "I condemn the parading of bodies and displaying of the coffins of the deceased Israeli hostages by Hamas on Thursday. Under international law, any handover of the remains of the deceased must comply with the prohibition of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, ensuring respect for the dignity of the deceased and their families."

Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu also took to X to say that "In light of Hamas's repeated violations, including the ceremonies that humiliate our hostages and the cynical exploitation of our hostages for propaganda purposes >> it has been decided to delay the release of terrorists that was planned for yesterday until the release of the next hostages has been assured, and without the humiliating ceremonies." (@IsraelPM, Feb. 23)

Israel also expanded its security operations to the West Bank. The Israeli military said in a statement that "As part of the operation to thwart terrorism...the IDF recently destroyed several buildings in Jenin" that "were used as terrorist infrastructure." The army later said it destroyed 23 buildings in the operation. The Palestinian authorities however said that Israel has been indiscriminately targeting civilians.

In a setback to reconstruction efforts in Gaza, the US announced that it would be suspending funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). This came through in a little noticed Presidential order by Trump issued simultaneously with his Iran maximum pressure declaration of Feb. 4. The previous Biden Administration had also suspended funding to the UNRWA and Trump's decision would continue that policy. The UNRWA funding was suspended by the US following allegations that twelve UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel. Elise Stefanik, the US Ambassador to the UN, went a step further and declared that the US would not only defund but also dismantle the UNRWA.

The ceasefire on the Israeli Lebanese border remained in force, but with ongoing Israeli violations. Nasrallah's elaborate funeral ceremonies in Beirut were also marked by Israeli fighter jets bombing targets in Baalbek in Southern Lebanon, for long a Hezbollah base and stronghold. Israel also announced that it would

continue to occupy five strategic posts inside Lebanon, along the border and overlooking Israeli towns. These steps are a violation of the ceasefire agreement concluded on November 27 last year.

In further tactical moves, Israel also declared that it would secure its borders with Syria and would continue to occupy strategic outposts including Mount Hermon. The "Al-Monitor" news website reported: "In demanding the demilitarization of the areas near its border, Israel has made it clear that it would not tolerate the deployment of heavy weapons or militias in the area between Damascus and the Golan Heights. "We have learned from the mistakes of the past that anyone who thinks of replacing the militias launched by Iran with militias launched by some other power is making a mistake. That won't happen", a top Israeli diplomatic official told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity." (Al Monitor, Feb. 25)

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first visit to West Asia included stop-overs in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh (Feb. 19-20). Rubio affirmed the US's continued strategic engagement in West Asia, and with its principle regional partners. Saudi Arabia is reported to have expressed its readiness to mediate between the US and Iran. A State Department read-out stated that Rubio's discussions covered "remaining challenges in Gaza, ways to advance stability in Syria, Lebanon, and across the region, and ways to address threats to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea."

A series of other incoming and outgoing visits in the region also marked the geopolitical shifts underway across West Asia and the Levant.

Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani was on a two-day state visit to India (Feb. 17-18). Sheikh Al Thani was received on arrival at the airport by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, breaking protocol and a rare honour reserved for select dignitaries. The two sides elevated relations to a "Strategic Partnership". On a post on X, @narendramodi said "Trade featured prominently in our talks. We want to increase and diversify India-Qatar trade linkages. Our nations can also work closely in sectors like energy, technology, healthcare, food processing, pharma and green hydrogen." A free trade agreement is reported to be under discussion, alongside an increase in bilateral trade to US\$ 28 billion by 2030 (currently it is a little under US\$ 14 bn.) The summit joint statement stated that the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), one of the most powerful investment funds in the world, would be opening an office in India. It was also announced that Qatar is committed to invest US\$10 billion in India.

Upon conclusion of the India leg of his overseas visit, Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani went to Tehran (Feb. 18). In stark contrast to the reception accorded to him in India, he was received on arrival by Iran's Energy Minister Abbas Aliabadi. During the Qatar Amir's visit, a number of cooperation documents were signed in different areas, including trade, cultural, and educational sectors. Last October, Iran's President Pezeshkian was in Doha for the annual Asian Dialogue Conference Forum (ACD).

Further highlighting the fast-changing geo-political shifts, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was on an unscheduled visit to Tehran (Feb. 25). Lavrov's visit came close on the heels of his meetings in Riyadh (Feb. 18) with a US delegation led by Rubio. Also present in the Rubio-Lavrov meeting were Trump's National Security Advisor Mike Waltz and his Middle East Special Envoy Steve Witkoff.

While the primary focus of the Riyadh meeting was Ukraine, Lavrov's unscheduled visit to Tehran was apparently to ferry US messages to the Iranian government. However, in their joint press conference in Tehran, Foreign Minister Araghchi maintained Iran's stance that talks with the US would be a non-starter under a policy of "maximum pressure". He said "Tehran's position on nuclear negotiations is clear. We will not negotiate under pressure, threats and sanctions."

This firm position was a departure from previous conciliatory signals from Iran of a willingness to restart talks with the US-EU3 on the nuclear issue. This readiness was Iran's response to Trump's reelection and was conveyed at various times by several senior Iranian officials including President Masoud Pezeshkian.

All this changed very quickly with the NSPM-2. Trump's announcement of a policy of "maximum pressure" drew a defiant reaction from Iran. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei set the guiding policy narrative in a detailed post on X (Feb. 7) stating: "One must not negotiate with a government like the US government. Negotiating with a government like the US government is not wise, intelligent, or honourable. In the 2010s, we negotiated with the US & an agreement was formed. The same person now in office in US, tore up the agreement. Even before him, those with whom the agreement was reached didn't carry it out. The agreement was supposed to lift sanctions, but they weren't lifted! Negotiations with the US have no effect on solving the country's problems. What solves problems is the determination of Iranian officials and the cooperation of a united, Iranian nation."

As expected, Khamenei's position was soon echoed by senior officials. President Pezeshkian took the lead, saying "I was of the opinion that we should hold talks, but when the Supreme Leader stated that there should be no dialogue with the United States, we announced that we would not hold talks." Foreign Minister Araghchi posted that "So-called Maximum Pressure is a failed experience. Repeating that will only yet again compel Maximum Resistance. Smart people ought to choose Maximum Wisdom instead." Araghchi went on to say that Iran was a member of the NPT and other global nonproliferation measures, and that Iran has already made abundantly clear that "under no circumstances will it ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons."

Rounding off the current stalemate on the Iran nuclear issue was the IAEA's quarterly report on the status of Iran's nuclear programme which was leaked to the media (Feb. 26). The IAEA reported further increases in Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium, including uranium enriched to 60%. According to the IAEA, Iran's stockpiles stand at an estimated 605 pounds of uranium enriched to 60%, while its total stockpile of enriched uranium now stands at 18,286 pounds, up by 3,725 pounds since November. The next meeting of the IAEA's Board of Governors (BoG) is due to take place in March and the US-EU3 approach will become clearer by the time of those meetings. It may be recalled that in November last year the BoG had adopted a censure resolution on Iran, a move led to Iran defiantly ramping up its uranium stockpile to its current levels.



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