



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Cover Image:

The Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Dr. Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, held talks with Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, in Damascus, on December 2, 2024. Source: [X/@araghchi](#)

Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, made a televised statement announcing the ceasefire deal with Hezbollah, on November 27, 2024. Source: [X/@IsraelMFA](#)

The Second Meeting of the Saudi-Chinese-Iranian Joint Tripartite Committee was held in Riyadh, on November 19, 2024. Source: [X/@KSAmofaEN](#)

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West Asia Review

by

Amb. Gaddam Dharmendra

I. Impact of Trump's Election on West Asia

Donald Trump's decisive election to a second presidential term, and the Republican Party's control of both the US Senate and the House of Representatives, is expected to give the incoming Trump Administration greater leeway in executing its foreign policy priorities, including in West Asia. Trump has already demanded early Senate confirmations for his cabinet.

A resumption of Trump's pro-Israel policies became apparent with the rapid announcement of nominees to head key cabinet positions on foreign and security policy, namely Marco Rubio as Secretary of State, Mike Waltz as National Security Adviser, Mike Huckabee as Ambassador to Israel, and Elise Stefanik as Ambassador to the UN. All four are known for their strong support for Israel, and are expected to continue the tough anti-Iran positions witnessed during Trump's first term. Of particular interest is also the appointment of Massad Boulos as Middle East adviser. Boulos is said to be close to influential sections in Lebanon and to Mahmud Abbas, leader of the Palestine Authority.

The "Trump effect" is now in play on multiple levels and across the numerous fissures in West Asia. While all major regional actors are preparing for Trump 2.0, Syria is back on the boil as Turkey, Russia and Iran are backing rival factions and militias and positioning for advantage. Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, has fallen to pro-Turkish Islamist forces. In Lebanon, a severely battered Hezbollah has enabled the outgoing Biden Administration to secure a tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. There has, however, been no movement yet on the Gaza front with Hamas. Shortly after Hamas posted a video of an Israeli-American hostage pleading for his release, Trump issued a characteristically tough warning to Hamas, demanding that they release all hostages before his swearing-in on January 20, 2025 or "there will be all hell to pay...for those in charge who perpetrated these atrocities against humanity".

II. Renewed Conflict in Syria

In his first term, Trump had been persuaded to back down from carrying out his proposal to withdraw US forces from Syria. Trump has renewed this pledge, making it clear that he intends to complete US troop withdrawal from Syria. This seems to have triggered the sudden crisis in Syria, as the Levant's overlapping complexities are surging to the fore with renewed urgency. Major regional players including Türkiye, Iran, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, as also Israel, are scrambling to catch up with these fast-moving developments.

Beginning in the last week of November, the stalemate in Syria, which has persisted since 2016, was broken with the capture of Aleppo by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Over a period of some four days, the HTS launched a fierce blitzkrieg, capturing Aleppo with little or no resistance from Syrian government forces.

The HTS is a Turkish backed Islamist group, said to be a rebranded al-Qaeda in Syria. It is led by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, who had previously headed the Nusra Front (formerly Al Qaeda in Syria). Jolani claims to have split from al-Qaeda.

Aleppo is Syria's second largest city and major commercial centre. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, it has been fiercely contested by all sides, eventually ending up under Syrian government control.

The timing of the capture of Aleppo by HTS, and its forays towards the central city of Hama, is therefore of considerable interest. Two factors are the likely triggers for this latest eruption of a conflict that has remained frozen since 2016. First, Trump's declaration of a US withdrawal from Syria, which has led to the scramble for strategic positioning by major actors. Second, President Bashar al-Assad's tenuous hold on Aleppo has been primarily due to Russian and Iranian support. It was Hezbollah cadres on the ground in Syria, together with their Iranian handlers or "military advisers" (as Iran prefers to call them), who were instrumental in helping Assad secure Aleppo, along with vast regions of central and southeastern Syria.

Both of Assad's principal backers are currently distracted and stretched for resources: Russia due to its ongoing war in Ukraine, and Iran by the near collapse of its "Axis of Resistance", especially the Hezbollah which has suffered debilitating losses in its self-chosen conflict with Israel. The damage inflicted by Israel in recent months has rendered Hezbollah a spent force, at least for the foreseeable future. That HTS took advantage of Hezbollah's weakness is reflected in videos

posted online by its cadres, crediting their military successes in Aleppo to the losses inflicted by Israel on Hezbollah.

Shortly after Aleppo's fall, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi made back-to-back visits to Damascus and Ankara on December 2-3, 2024. For Iran, Assad's fall will be a strategic loss, given its promotion of a "Shia crescent" and its use of the Syrian land route to supply Hezbollah and stoke the fires on the Lebanese-Israel border.

During Araghchi's visit to Damascus, Iranian media reported that Iran would consider sending troops to Syria. It is unclear, however, whether Iran really intends to send its troops to back Assad, given domestic sensitivities. Reports indicate that pro-Iran militias in Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Units, and Shia cadres from Afghanistan, the Fatemiyoun brigade, may likely enter the fray on Assad's side.

In Ankara, Araghchi is reported to have told his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, that Iran will not allow the collapse of the Assad regime.

On the other hand, Türkiye and the US have their own interests. Turkey does not wish to see Kurdish autonomy on its borders, while the US does not wish to see a revival of ISIS militancy. For Türkiye, its other concern is to ensure the return of the over three million Syrian refugees on its territory. Were this to happen, it will be a big political win for President Erdogan, who also finds himself in a favorable position if Trump decides to follow up on his stated desire to withdraw from Syria. Erdogan has for long sought to engage Assad, only to be rebuffed.

The risk, however, is of renewed civil war in Syria. A collapse of the Assad regime, with all its dire consequences, cannot be ruled out and the setbacks will be to multiple actors. In recent years, the Saudis and Emiratis have reconciled with Assad, fearing Turkish expansion. Expressions of concern over Assad's fate have emerged in both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. There is much going on behind the scenes in these fast shifting dynamics, which will factor into reshaping some of Trump's decisions on regional policy.

III. Trump's "Maximum Pressure" and Iran

Among Trump's first priorities will be to address an unresolved issue from his previous term, the multi-layered regional challenge posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Going forward, Trump has a fortuitous opportunity before him. Iran now

has a moderate president in Masoud Pezeshkian, along with known pragmatists such as Javad Zarif as his Vice President and Abbas Araghchi as foreign minister.

The developments in recent months in the Levant have left Iran's main clients, Assad in Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon, severely weakened. Also, Iran's famed "forward defense" strategy, of propping up its regional proxies so as to pin down Israel, is in tatters following the decimation of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Israel's strikes this year have taken out almost the entire top-level leadership, and scores of the rank and file, of both the Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as commanders of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) stationed in Syria and Lebanon. By choosing to directly confront Israel, Iran has taken serious hits to its nuclear and missile production facilities.

Consequently, and behind the bluster emerging from the hardliners in Tehran, recalculations appear to be underway in Iran, a pragmatic reassessment to minimise the fallout from recent setbacks to Iran's "Axis of Resistance".

Reports indicate that Trump's Middle East adviser, Massad Boulos, has sent out twin ultimatums to Iran, i.e., the continuation of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, and/or "run serious negotiations". The latter, however, comes with several caveats, namely that Iran must stop supporting its proxies across the region, scale down its missile programme, and make concessions on its nuclear programme. Each of these asks are inter-twined, and will involve hard negotiations.¹

It may also be recalled that within days of Trump's election, there were reports in the western media of a 'positive' meeting having taken place in New York on November 11, 2024 between businessman and Trump's close confidante Elon Musk, and Saeed Iravani, the Iranian Ambassador to the UN. There were the expected vehement denials in Iran, whereas a Musk spokesperson's cryptic response to questions was: "we do not comment on reports of private meetings that did or did not occur".

It is not known who initiated the meeting, but if true, these reports point to Trump's unorthodox style and perhaps also to early signalling by both Iran and

¹ "Liban, Israël, Gaza, Iran: le nouveau conseiller Moyen-Orient de Trump dévoile sa vision au « Point »". Le Point", December 3, 2024. https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/liban-israel-gaza-iran-le-nouveau-conseiller-moyen-orient-de-trump-devoile-sa-vision-au-point-03-12-2024-2577076_24.php

the US of possible future deals. Such overtures go along with Trump's innate self-belief as a dealmaker.

Subsequently, on November 13, 2024 Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi staked out Iran's opening gambit to the Trump Administration, posting on X that: "Maximum Pressure 1.0 compelled 'Maximum Resistance' and ended in 'Maximum Defeat' for the US. The proof? One example: just compare Iran's peaceful nuclear programme before and after the so-called 'Maximum Pressure' policy". Araghchi's posturing also appears to be directed at assuaging Iran's hardline factions, who hold a majority in the Majlis and remain vehemently opposed to any contact with the Americans.

Signals from Iran now are of a scaling down of their confrontationist rhetoric, and of nuanced preparations for Trump 2.0 This can be attributed to pragmatic calculations in Tehran, reassessing their current trajectory in the wake of the devastating setbacks suffered in the preceding months by both Iran and its regional proxies. The recent developments in Syria will also lay the groundwork for future engagement between Iran and the US.

IV. Hezbollah-Israel Ceasefire

Another sign of Iran's regional recalculations is the ceasefire that came into effect in the early hours of November 28, 2024 suspending the months-long conflict between the Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel. In essence, Hezbollah was forced to climb down from its insistence on linking a ceasefire on the Israeli-Lebanese border with a ceasefire Hamas in Gaza. The latest accord, negotiated over several weeks, was brokered by the US and France, and cleared by Israel's security cabinet. Lebanese PM Najib Mikati was also brought onboard. The in-coming Trump Administration is reported to have greenlighted the deal.

President Biden announced the ceasefire, saying that "civilians on both sides will soon be able to safely return to their communities" and that "this is designed to be a permanent cessation of hostilities...what is left of Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations will not be allowed to threaten the security of Israel again".

The terms of the ceasefire provide an insight into the highly weakened position that the Hezbollah finds itself in. The ceasefire calls for an initial 60-day period in the halt to the fighting; withdrawal of Hezbollah forces to the north of the Litany River; and deployment of Lebanese Armed Forces to southern Lebanon (these last two provisions are modelled on UN Resolution 1701 of 2006, which was never

really enforced). Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib has said that the Lebanese army would send 5000 troops to southern Lebanon, while the US and France are to oversee its implementation along with the UNIFIL peacekeeping force. France is to assist the Lebanese army to prevent ceasefire violations. Israeli troops, who are also required to withdraw, have, however, retained a presence in and around their border in southern Lebanon.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that the ceasefire will allow Israel to focus on Iran and its proxies. “We have set it (Hezbollah) back decades, eliminated ... its top leaders, destroyed its rockets and missiles, neutralized thousands of fighters, and obliterated years of terror infrastructure near our border.”²

Iran’s response to the ceasefire has been one of bravado. Foreign Minister Araghchi posted on X on November 28 that “Israel pleaded for a ceasefire after (suffering) heavy casualties in southern Lebanon” and that “it is high time for Israel to accept defeat in Gaza too”. The IRGC Chief, Hossain Salami, termed the ceasefire as a strategic and humiliating defeat for Israel. In general, media reports in Iran have framed the ceasefire as a victory for Hezbollah, and a humiliation for the US and Israel.

V. Trump and Saudi Arabia

In his first term, Trump had chosen Saudi Arabia as the destination for his first foreign visit. Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, who was the architect of that decision, continues to maintain close business ties with the Saudis.

While Trump is yet to announce his nominee as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, his second term will have to contend with significant regional changes that have taken place in the preceding years. The most important among these is the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and its Gulf neighbours.

Trump will also have to contend with the fact that the Chinese were instrumental in finalising the Iran-Saudi normalisation process in Beijing in May, 2023. On November 19, 2024 the Second China-Saudi Arabia-Iran Joint Committee meeting took place in Riyadh, reiterating the commitment of the parties to adhere by the Beijing Agreement. On regional developments, the three countries called for “an immediate end to the Israeli military operations in both Palestine and

² “Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire takes effect”. Nikkei Asia, November 27, 2024.
<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Middle-East-crisis/Israel-Hezbollah-ceasefire-takes-effect>

Lebanon, condemned the Israeli attack and its violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iran, and called for ensuring the unimpeded flow of humanitarian and relief aid to Palestine and Lebanon”.³

These positions are bound to affect prospects for normalisation of Saudi-Israel relations, and the expansion of the so-called Abraham Accords. This was a much sought after prize for Trump in his first term, and one he is certain to pursue in his second. In aiming for this goal, Trump will have to contend with the changed strategic circumstances of the three main actors, i.e., the Saudis, Israel and Iran. Among these, the Saudis are already slow-walking their readiness to engage with Israel. There are renewed sensitivities in Saudi Arabia over what is seen as Israel's disproportionate military actions in Gaza and Lebanon. If Trump wishes to achieve his goal on expanding the Abraham Accords, he will have to put pressure on Netanyahu to honestly engage in the search for diplomatic outcomes.

³ “Joint Press Release of the Second Meeting of the China-Saudi Arabia-Iran Trilateral Joint Committee”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 20, 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202411/t20241120_11529928.html



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