



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## WEST ASIA REVIEW JANUARY 2025

*Author*

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Delhi Policy Group

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Image:

*The Foreign Ministers of the Gulf nations, the European Union, the UK, the US, Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, the Secretary General of the Arab League, and the UN's Special Envoy for Syria met in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on January 12 to discuss the situation in Syria. Source: [Official X Handle/Saudi Press Agency English](#)*

*Russian President Vladimir Putin met Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in Moscow on January 17, 2025. Source: [Website/President of Russia](#)*

*Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met US President Donald Trump's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, in Jerusalem on January 29, 2025. Source: [Official X Handle/Prime Minister of Israel](#)*

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## West Asia Review

by

Amb. Gaddam Dharmendra

### Overview

Ongoing developments in West Asia and the Levant are indicative of gradual shifts in the geo-political landscape and of ongoing transitions. Saudi Arabia and the United States are closely coordinating efforts to shape the region while traditional power backers such as Iran and Russia are on the backfoot. The joint US-Saudi strategy is to wean the region away from Iran's orbit. Both have worked closely to secure a ceasefire in Gaza, while the November ceasefire in Lebanon continues to hold.

US President Donald Trump has maintained his stand to withdraw US forces from north-east Syria. He also signed an executive order suspending US overseas aid for a period of 90 days. Both decisions would impact anti-ISIS operations in Syria.

A new political alignment has emerged in Lebanon with the election as President (on January 9) of General Joseph Khalil Aoun, presently Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Aoun immediately nominated Nawaz Salam to be the country's prime minister. In Syria, interim leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa has been appointed as "transitional President". The overall situation in the country, however, continues to be fluid. Reports are of renewed sectarian tensions, especially attacks targeting the minority Alawites, a Shiite sect from which the deposed President Basher al-Assad hailed.

There is also the jockeying for strategic space in Syria. Turkish forces are directly confronting US backed Kurdish elements to the north while Russia is struggling to retain its bases in Tartus and Latakia. In Iran, audio recordings have surfaced of a commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps conceding that Iran failed to secure Assad's position and admitting to the strategic setbacks of recent months.

The Saudis have begun proactively engaging with the new actors in Syria and Lebanon, holding out prospects for infusing the billions of dollars needed in reconstruction while also pressing for institutional reforms. The Saudis convened

an Arab League member-states' meeting in Riyadh on Syria's reconstruction. No such commitments have been forthcoming as yet on aiding Gaza's reconstruction. The UN estimates that some 50 million tons of rubble would need to be cleared in Gaza, an exercise that could likely take as long as two decades. This was also repeated by Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy, who said that it could take between 10-15 years to rebuild Gaza.<sup>1</sup>

A controversial call by President Trump to relocate Gazans to Egypt and Jordan received a firm push back from Arab states. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi also responded to Trump's suggestion, saying in an interview with Sky News (January 28), "Palestine cannot be deleted from this region. Palestinians cannot be expelled. So, my suggestion is something else. Instead of Palestinians, try to expel Israelis. Take them to Greenland so they can kill two birds with one stone."

Witkoff's early success in delivering the Gaza ceasefire has apparently led to his appointment as Trump's envoy to handle the Iran file. Reports are of Trump's keenness to make a fresh start by prioritising diplomacy with Iran and push for a deal on the nuclear issue. Trump's Pentagon picks, of Elbridge Colby as Under Secretary for Policy and Michael P. DiMino as Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Middle East, indicate prioritising diplomacy before resorting to other options. Both Colby and DiMino have been publicly advocating for diplomacy over getting into endless wars which they consider as unsustainable. Trump also unceremoniously dismissed Brian Hook, a hawkish anti-Iran official, who had served as special envoy on Iran in his first term.

A third round of Iran-E3 talks took place in Geneva in mid-January, while a debate got underway inside Iran on engaging with the Trump administration on nuclear negotiations. Memories of Trump's harsh anti-Iran posturing in his first term remain fresh within the Iranian establishment. The issue is polarising Iran's factions, given Trump's decision in his first term to suspend US participation in the JCPOA. Oman has once again expressed its readiness to mediate future talks, as it had done in the past.

## Gaza Ceasefire

A tenuous six-week ceasefire came into effect in Gaza on January 19, a day before President Trump's inauguration for a second term. He had repeatedly warned that

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<sup>1</sup> "Exclusive: Trump Middle East envoy says rebuilding Gaza could take 10 to 15 years", [Axios](#), January 30, 2025

there would be “hell to pay” for Hamas if they did not release the hostages before his inauguration. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was also under immense American pressure to meet Trump’s deadline. In return, Netanyahu has been rewarded with the first head of government to visit the White House (February 4).

The final terms and conditions of the Gaza ceasefire were negotiated in Doha by Qatar, Egypt and the US (on January 15), ferrying messages between Israeli and Hamas negotiators. The US, Egypt and Qatar will jointly monitor the ceasefire’s implementation. Outgoing US President Biden announced the deal and reports indicate that the incoming and outgoing administrations worked together closely. Trump’s Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, played a pivotal role in convincing Netanyahu to agree to the ceasefire’s terms and conditions. The deal was softened by inviting Netanyahu to the White House and lifting a hold placed by President Biden on the transfer of heavy US munitions and weapons to Israel.

Within Israel, however, Netanyahu has come under criticism for what some see as a bad deal requiring Israel to make major concessions and foregoing its battlefield gains. These apprehensions quickly came to the fore with the reappearance, to widespread celebrations, of heavily armed Hamas fighters, in full battle gear and taking out victory parades in pick-up trucks. Subsequently, leaked reports emerged of an intelligence briefing by the outgoing Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken (January 24), where he was quoted as saying that Hamas has successfully recruited as many fighters as it had lost during the 15-month long conflict. Blinken says that Hamas has enlisted between 10-15,000 new recruits to its ranks and that this was a “recipe for an enduring insurgency and perpetual war.” Israel puts the death toll of Hamas militants in Gaza at around 20,000. Blinken’s stark warning was, “Each time Israel completes its military operations and pulls back, Hamas militants regroup and re-emerge because there’s nothing else to fill the void.”<sup>2</sup>

The Gaza ceasefire brings a fragile suspension to the 15-month long conflict between Israel and Hamas. A Hamas spokesperson, Basem Naim, confirmed the deal (on January 15), which was subsequently affirmed by the Israeli cabinet. Netanyahu’s office, @IsraelPM explained on X that “Following an evaluation of all

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<sup>2</sup> “Exclusive: Hamas has added up to 15,000 fighters since start of war, US figures show”, [Reuters](#), January 25, 2025

diplomatic, security and humanitarian aspects, and while understanding that the proposed deal supports the achievement of the objectives of the war, the Security Cabinet has recommended that the Government approve the proposed framework."

Compromises were made by both sides. Hamas is said to have dropped its insistence that Israel withdraw from the strategic southern Philadelphi corridor, on the border with Egypt. Hamas also withdrew its demand that the first phase should include a permanent ceasefire. Several issues are reportedly being worked out and may take longer than the six-week initial timeframe. These include the permanent cessation of hostilities. The current six-week temporary ceasefire will continue in parallel with ongoing negotiations on other issues and can be extended subject to fulfilment of certain conditions. In short, the complex three-phase ceasefire contains layers of pre-conditions and vaguely defined commitments by each side, a reflection of the rush to meet Trump's deadline.

In the first six-week period, all armed conflict is to be suspended. This has already been breached by Israel's bombing of Hamas' weapons stores. Israel began releasing several hundred Palestinians from its jails in exchange for 33 hostages out of the 98 being held by Hamas. Simultaneously, Israel commenced withdrawal of its troops from most of Gaza, including from the Netzarim corridor which bisects the strip. This will enable displaced Gazans to return to their homes to the north Gaza strip and permitting fuel and other supplies.

The second phase will see the release of all remaining hostages, including male Israeli soldiers, a permanent ceasefire and complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. It is not clear whether Israel will withdraw its forces from the strategic Philadelphi Corridor, as control over this strip enables the interdiction and prevents replenishment of weapons stores by Hamas. The third phase envisages the reconstruction of Gaza and Hamas commits to handover remains of the deceased. Assessments are that a third of the hostages in Hamas' custody may be dead.

The ceasefire was welcomed in all major capitals across West Asia. In a press release, India's Ministry of External Affairs hoped that the ceasefire "will lead to a safe and sustained supply of humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza. We have consistently called for release of all hostages, ceasefire, and return to a path of dialogue and diplomacy."

**In Lebanon**, the two-month old ceasefire, concluded on 27<sup>th</sup> November last year, continues to hold but Israel ignored a January 26 deadline to withdraw its forces from southern Lebanon. Lebanese authorities said that they will be extending the ceasefire to mid-February. Under the terms of the November ceasefire, the Lebanese military was to jointly monitor and control the border with Israel, together with UN peacekeepers. Simultaneously, Israel was required to withdraw its forces from Southern Lebanon. However, Prime Minister Netanyahu made it clear that Israeli forces will adopt a phased withdrawal until such time as the Lebanese army takes full control of the border and disarms the pro-Iran Shiite militia group Hezbollah.

The Lebanese ceasefire is being monitored jointly by the US and France together with the Lebanese Armed Forces, under a "Ceasefire Implementation Mechanism". In terms of the ceasefire, Hezbollah militants are to retreat to the north of the Litani river, or 30 kms from Israel's borders and dismantle all military fortifications. Reports, however, are that the militant group is, contrary to the terms of the November ceasefire, regrouping and remains in control of areas south of the Litani river. This has for long been a contentious issue and given current developments, it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Hezbollah's new leader, Sheikh Naim Qassem, demanded (January 27) that Israel withdraw from the occupied border areas in southern Lebanon. He also rejected the extension of the cease-fire arrangements to mid-February.

For its part, Israel has been opportunistically targeting Hezbollah positions around the Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border, an area that is used to smuggle weapons and personnel. A complicating factor has been the continuing return of villagers to their homes in southern Lebanon. This is creating a flashpoint between Israel and the Lebanese government. As in the Gaza strip, distinguishing between civilians and militants is a challenge, as the latter wage war dressed up in civilian clothing.

On the political front, a two-year deadlock in Lebanese politics was broken with the election of General Joseph Khalil Aoun, Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, as the country's 14<sup>th</sup> President on January 9. Aoun's election for a six-year term was backed by the US and Saudi Arabia. Reports are that the Saudi ambassador in Beirut, Waleed Bukhari, was present in the Lebanese parliament during the final vote, an indication of the realignments across the Levant. The Saudis, together with the Americans, are also signalling their determination to



weaken the decades long adverse Iranian influence. Aoun is expected to go to Saudi Arabia on his first overseas visit.

Aoun's election represents a fundamental shift away from the years long dominance by Hezbollah of Lebanese politics. Within a week of his election, the Lebanese Parliament took another major step, approving (January 13) Nawaf Salam as the country's prime minister. Salam, whose name was recommended by President Aoun, secured a comfortable majority and will now form a new government. Lebanon has a unique power-sharing arrangement, a reflection of the region's historic cultural and religious diversity. A Maronite Christian is to be the president, a Sunni Muslim the prime minister and a Shiite Muslim as speaker of the parliament.

Salam is a veteran diplomat, and until his election he was the President of the International Court of Justice at the Hague. Significantly, it was during his presidency that ICJ issued its ruling, ordering Israel to take steps to prevent a genocide in Gaza.

## Syria

As is the case in Lebanon, the Saudis are also stepping up and signalling their readiness to fund the reconstruction of Syria. Syria's Foreign Minister Assad al-Shibani was in Riyadh on his first overseas visit (January 2-3). Shibani's regional tour included stopovers in Doha and Abu Dhabi. In all three capitals, Syria's message was to seek reconstruction assistance and the lifting of Assad-era sanctions.

Shibani's most important visit, however, was to Saudi Arabia. On hand to welcome him were Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Defense Minister Khaled bin Salman, a clear statement of Saudi Arabia's prospective influence and intended regional role. It maybe recalled that in December, Syria's interim leader, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, had praised Saudi Arabia, fondly recalling that he had spent his childhood in the Kingdom.

The Riyadh meeting's primary focus was aiding Syria's reconstruction. In addition to the Syrian Foreign Minister, Foreign Ministers in attendance included from the UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. Also invited were senior officials from France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, the US and the European

Union. Riyadh's unequivocal stance is to seek to reshape the regional order by diminishing and rolling back Iranian influence across the region and preventing the rise of destabilising Islamist regimes seen as inimical to regional stability. Analysts are pointing to a Saudi-led Axis of Stability anchored in development and modernisation, as opposed to Iran's regressive Axis of Resistance.

Nevertheless, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister (Political Affairs), Majid Takht-ravanchi, said (January 29) that Iran had opened communications with the new dispensation in Syria and had assured that it would respect Syrian sovereignty and will do everything to assist Syria.

As always, the US will be a critical player given the wide-ranging American sanctions, under the Caesar Act (the "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019") imposed on the Assad regime. In December, the US House of Representatives approved the National Defense Authorization Act for 2025, which included a provision to extend the sanctions under the Caesar Act for an additional five years. Towards end January, Foreign Minister Shibani was at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos with an ambitious showcasing of investment opportunities in Syria.

## Russia

Russia is scrambling to hang on to its bases in Syria. A Russian delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov was in Damascus (January 28), the first such visit since the fall of the Assad regime. Bogdanov was quoted as saying that Russia was keen to maintain its Mediterranean bases in Tartous and Latakia. Syria's interim leader Ahmed Al-Sharaa had said last month that Russia was an important strategic partner of Syria, one with whom Syria shared "strategic interests".

Media reports are that the "director of the customs department at the Tartous governorate in western Syria, Riyadh Judi, confirmed to the Syrian al-Watan newspaper that the agreement signed with the Russian company to run and invest in the strategic Mediterranean port was canceled. He added that all the revenues from the port will now go to the Syrian state (Al-Monitor, January 22).

The outcome of Bogdanov's visit was not exactly clear, particularly with regards to the Russian lease of the strategic Tartous naval base. The base was first built by

the former Soviet Union in 1971 and modernised in 2017. In December, there were reports that Russia was relocating its naval assets to Libya, but the Bogdanov visit indicates Russian hedging perhaps in anticipation of a future Trump-Putin summit.

Russia and Iran concluded a long pending 20 year strategic partnership agreement in Moscow on January 17. The deal was signed just days ahead of Trump's swearing-in ceremony, and visiting Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian was quoted as saying that Iran-Russia cooperation "can neutralize US and Western sanctions and their excessive demands". Pezeshkian repeated Iran's official position on the conflict in Ukraine, reiterating that it was triggered by NATO's eastward expansion. Bilateral military cooperation figures prominently in the 47 article document published in Farsi on Iran's government website.

"Al-Monitor", the online news portal, reported (January 18) that at a televised joint press conference with Putin following the signing ceremony, Pezeshkian had declared that "This document has been drafted in accordance with the interests of the two nations and is capable of outlining a bright horizon on the path of bilateral cooperation", and had expressed hope that "we will witness a new chapter in strategic collaboration." Supreme Leader Khamenei has been a longtime proponent of forging closer relations with Russia and China.

## Iran

In Iran, a leaked audio recording of an address by IRGC Brig. Gen. Behrouz Esbati, at a mosque in Tehran surfaced to much interest. The timing as well as choice of the mosque is interesting. The ValiAsr mosque in central Tehran is an important venue for regime insiders, especially for the military, to showcase achievements, exhort the faithful or signal policy changes. At an event titled "Answering questions about Syria's collapse" (December 31), Esbati was quoted as saying "We were defeated, and defeated very badly, we took a very big blow and it's been very difficult." Esbati's comments assume importance, in terms of both their timing and for the divergence from the regime's standard talking points on Iran's strategic setbacks in Syria.

Esbati was on the last flight out of Syria and he talked quite frankly of the differences that developed between Assad and his Iranian handlers. Esbati said that Iran-Syria relations had been strained for months prior to Assad's fall. He

added that the collapse of the Assad regime was inevitable given the rampant corruption, political oppression and economic hardships that people faced, from the lack of power to fuel to liveable incomes. Esbati admitted that Assad did not heed repeated warnings to reform.

While the timing of Esbati's comments is of interest, the rationale for publicising his comments assumes greater importance. In Iran, the IRGC and not the MFA has traditionally set policy on the country's immediate neighbourhood, especially with the Axis of Resistance. While on the surface Esbati could be seen justifying the IRGC's recent setbacks, some commentators assess that deep down it could also be a cautionary warning to Iran's voluble far-right hardliners by contextualising developments in Syria with governance overreach and the importance of managing the country's socio-economic situation. Esbati could also well be reflecting reassessments within the system of the "forward defense" strategy and a refocus of energies on the homeland. This has been the position of the pragmatic moderate faction within Iran which is now back in the forefront under President Masoud Pezeshkian.

On the nuclear issue, January 15 marked the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which had entered into force on January 15, 2016. In Geneva, the UK, France and Germany (the E3) held a third round of talks-about-talks (January 13-14), laying the groundwork for future engagement. Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister (Legal and International Affairs) said that the talks are "not formal negotiations but rather an opportunity to clarify issues and engage in deeper consultations". Gharibabadi, who was earlier Iran's PR to the IAEA, later posted on X, that the "talks were serious, frank and constructive. While going into some details, we discussed and examined ideas in the two areas of sanctions relief and nuclear that are essential to reaching an agreement. There was a consensus that the talks should be resumed and that in order to reach an agreement, a suitable atmosphere should be created and maintained by all parties".

Iranian media reports are of on-going internal deliberations on the nuclear issue. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was quoted as telling a religious congregation that "We should know that behind the smiles of diplomacy, hidden and inner enmities and malicious grudges lie. Let us open our eyes, let us not flatter them with affection. Let us be careful with whom we encounter, deal with, and speak." Khamenei's comments are being seen as cautioning his negotiators without

ruling out prospects for talks. Present at the religious congregation were President Masoud Pezeshkian and resident ambassadors of Muslim countries.

Simultaneously, Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (EOI), announced (January 13) that work had begun to expand Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in order to generate 3,000 megawatts of nuclear power by 2027. Iran's ambitious plan is to generate to 20,000 megawatts of nuclear electricity by 2041.

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