Iran, Hezbollah in focus during PM’s DC visit

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 05.02.2025

In addition to crucial discussions about the ongoing campaign against Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s meetings with President Donald Trump and top American officials will also center on the next phase of confronting Iran.

The necessity of countering Iran’s nuclear program and its regional proxy network is clear to both Washington and Jerusalem, particularly in the wake of the “Swords of Iron” war. Tehran is closely monitoring Netanyahu’s visit, understanding its critical role in shaping US and Israeli policy against the regime.

It is especially interesting to observe the internal discourse among Iran’s ruling circles regarding the preferred course of action concerning the country’s nuclear program, given the expectation that Trump will take tougher measures against Iran.

Debate in Iran over the nuclear program in Trump era

The current landscape reveals divisions within the Iranian regime. The ultra-conservative faction, led by Saeed Jalili, has urged the government to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels and store it in a secure location beyond the reach of foreign strikes. According to this camp, such a move would provide Iran with effective deterrence against the US and Israel. This position was articulated by nuclear scientist Fereydoon Abbasi, a close associate of Jalili, who reportedly survived an assassination attempt by Mossad in November 2010 due to his senior role in Iran’s nuclear program.

On the other hand, the moderate-reformist camp has taken a different approach. In recent months, Ali Larijani, a senior figure in this faction with deep expertise in Iran’s nuclear affairs, has urged the regime to make concessions in direct nuclear negotiations with Trump. His rationale is that such an approach could ease the hardships faced by the Iranian people by facilitating the removal of sanctions.

Meanwhile, within the conservative camp, some figures have distanced

themselves from recent Iranian threats to alter the country's nuclear doctrine, fearing that such rhetoric would only provoke a preemptive strike against Iran. Even within this faction, there are voices advocating for direct engagement with Trump. Ultimately, all eyes are on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose decision will determine the regime's course. Khamenei recently rejected direct negotiations with Trump in a speech, making it clear that any shift in policy would require his explicit approval.

For Israel, a key objective will be to convince Trump to avoid a partial agreement with Iran that focuses solely on the nuclear issue while allowing Tehran to rehabilitate its economy and escape its current economic crisis.

Urgent response needed to Iran's smuggling routes to Hezbollah

In addition, Netanyahu and his delegation must work with the Trump administration to counter Iran's newly established smuggling route, which aims to bolster Hezbollah. The terrorist organization is in desperate need of financial assistance to restore its standing and infrastructure, including its *da'wa* network—a system of welfare, health, education, and religious institutions that is a key pillar of Hezbollah's political and military power.

Recent reports indicate that Iran's Quds Force is operating three channels to renew the smuggling of financial aid to Hezbollah through Beirut's international airport: Flights operated by Mahan Air (which is linked to the Quds Force) passing through Turkish airspace, Iranian diplomats traveling to Beirut with suitcases full of cash, and Turkish nationals associated with the Quds Force smuggling funds via Istanbul-Beirut flights.

Tehran could potentially use this smuggling route through Beirut's airport to resume arms transfers to Hezbollah if it successfully secures this corridor, which currently appears to be used solely for financial purposes. The ongoing financial support undermines Israel's achievements in its war against Hezbollah, as it enables the group to begin its recovery and reconstruction efforts.

Israel must leverage Trump's influence to thwart Iran and Hezbollah's scheme. Given the US's global standing, a credible American threat of severe financial sanctions against Turkey—or even its expulsion from NATO—could pressure

Ankara to cease its cooperation with Iran on this issue.

Additionally, an American-backed Israeli threat to strike Beirut's airport if it continues to serve as an operational hub for the Quds Force could deter Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. Given Hezbollah's current weakened state and its urgent need to reinvent itself after losing the vast majority of its senior commanders, it is highly doubtful that the group could withstand an Israeli attack on Beirut's airport and risk reigniting a full-scale war against Israel.

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