

Russia and the Palestinians send a strong message to US



The Russian-sponsored Palestinian unity talks in Moscow last week were neither a success nor a failure. Uniting Palestinian factions was not the main objective of the Moscow conference. Instead, the nature of the event, the host country and the clear messages sent to Washington and Tel Aviv were all meant to communicate something else entirely. And they did.

The head of the Fatah delegation to the conference, Azzam Al-Ahmed, apologized to his hosts on behalf of Palestinians for failing to achieve political reconciliation. But that apology could have been prepared in advance. It would not have been rational to expect that a conference organized in such haste, with few preliminary meetings or intense prior consultations, could have achieved the coveted unity.

If one is to also consider the various unity agreements signed between Fatah and Hamas in the past — but never honored — and bearing in mind the additional punitive measures slapped by the Palestinian Authority (PA) on Gaza recently, a

unity deal in Russia would have been nothing less than a miracle.

So why did the Russians hold the conference in the first place? And why did the Palestinians agree to attend if its failure was a foretold conclusion? The answers lie elsewhere, specifically in Warsaw, Poland.

At about the same time that Palestinians met in Moscow under the auspices of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the US was holding its own conference in Warsaw. The Warsaw meet was Washington's attempt at creating a new political paradigm to replace the defunct "peace process," which itself was an American political invention.

While the peace process has failed terribly — thanks to the US' blind support of Israel — Warsaw, too, is unlikely to deliver any meaningful or long-term political vision in the Middle East. The conference was the equivalent of a public US declaration that only Israel matters and that Washington's commitment to Tel Aviv is paramount.

Even the PA of Mahmoud Abbas, known for its political subservience to Washington, was repulsed by the US' new, brazen political approach. Time and again, the White House has made it clear to its former Palestinian ally that its political aspirations are no longer a subject worthy of even mere consideration by the US. The relocating of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May last year was one of many such signs.

Abbas, who is now increasing pressure on his Hamas rivals in Gaza, and is plotting against his own Fatah rivals in the West Bank, agreed to allow Fatah participation in the Moscow conference because he also has a message for the US, the gist of which is: "We too have a new strategy and political alternatives."

Knowing in advance that the Donald Trump administration's so-called "deal of the century" is likely to be consistent with the new, more aggressive US foreign policy approach to the Middle East, Fatah is keen to preclude the announcement of the "deal" by seeking different routes that do not necessarily go through Washington. For Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian factions, freeing Fatah from Washington's grip is something they can also all agree on.

A Hamas official, Hussam Badran, was very clear regarding the consensus of all Palestinian participants in denouncing the "deal of the century (and) all

conspiracies to eliminate the Palestinian cause.” Musa Abu Marzouk, who led the Hamas delegation, declared from Moscow that all Palestinians factions will work together to “confront the deal of the century.” Fatah’s position was the same.

For Russia, a unified Palestinian call to defeat the latest US political stratagem in the region is consistent with Moscow’s ongoing efforts to undermine Washington’s formerly uncontested role in the Middle East.

True, the Palestinian factions failed to agree on a final statement written on behalf of all parties, but the disagreements were of little relevance to their political outlook concerning Washington’s political ploys. Islamic Jihad refuses to consider a Palestinian state limited to the 1967 borders and, along with Hamas, does not see the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the one and only representative of all Palestinians, as the draft of the final statement proposed.

These positions are hardly new, especially since Hamas and Islamic Jihad are not yet part of the PLO. Palestinian factions would need more than a two-day conference in Moscow to iron out the numerous details of such complex issues.

Russia, too, had its own messages to send. Aside from a message to the US-led Warsaw conference that Moscow is ready to fill the gap left by the US departure from the “peace process,” another Russian-hosted political summit in Sochi carried layers of direct and subtle meanings. The tripartite Sochi summit brought Russia, Turkey and Iran together to discuss the future of Syria following the US withdrawal.

For Russia to be heavily involved in two major political processes and conflicts concerning the Middle East at the same time is unprecedented since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet-led socialist bloc. Those in Washington who see Moscow as an adversary must have been particularly displeased by these developments. The US-Russian rivalry is definitely at its highest point in many years.

Hamas and other Palestinian factions, save Fatah, would have welcomed Russia’s re-engagement, regardless of any specific political contexts. Hamas has been under massive pressure and near-complete isolation in Gaza for many years, and a political outlet of this nature is, for the movement, a welcome development. Hamas is now ready to upgrade its ties with Russia, especially after leader Ismail Haniyeh received an official invitation to include Moscow on his next trip outside

of besieged Gaza.

The major change in the political equation, however, is that Fatah has been recently dropped from the US political sponsorship list and so is desperately seeking new political and financial patrons. Abbas is likely to wait for further indications of the changing American position before completely abandoning his quest of a US-sponsored “peace” with Israel.

All three conferences — Warsaw, Moscow and Sochi — should offer enough of an indication that the new political paradigm, which has been in the making for years, is unlikely to be reversed, at least not any time soon.

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