



MIDDLE EAST CONFERENCE IN WARSAW

On February 14, 2019 Warsaw hosted the Middle East security conference. The fact that such conference was organised in Poland caused controversy in Poland and abroad. Plans to hold the meeting in Warsaw were announced by the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in an interview for Fox News. He also noted that during the conference politicians will focus on the issue of stability, peace and security in the region.

Iran's reaction

Teheran perceived the conference as an element of a wider anti-Iranian campaign conducted by Donald Trump's administration. Just before the event, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed that Iran's containment will be discussed as a major issue. Poland as a hosting state was also criticized by the Iranians. Two days after the conference was announced to take place in Warsaw, Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Polish charge d'affaires and handed over a note of protest. Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs also called the conference as an "anti-Iranian circus". Iranian newspapers criticized Poland and underlined inter alia that "*Iranians will never forget Poland its betrayal*" (Teheran Times). Moreover what was symbolic for the Iranians was also the fact that the conference was organised two days after 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.

Iran's position on this matter should not be surprising for anyone. Donald Trump's administration, as well as US President himself, underlined on many occasions that Iran supports international terrorism and fails to comply with international arrangements. On May 2018, despite the opposition of other signatories, United States announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and launched a new campaign of sanctions against Iran. Iran's opposition to the conference was also caused by the list of participating states. All of these states directly and indirectly support American policy in the region, stays in more or less formalised alliance with the U.S. and perceives Teheran's influence as a threat and Iran as the main opponent in the Middle East as well as the Arab World. The following states also treat any kind of derogation from this political line as a form of betrayal which requires sanctions. Qatar and an unprecedented diplomatic freeze of the nation by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen and UAE can serve as an example.

During the conference, the Iranian issue was clearly presented as a priority. The U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence criticized states opposing new sanctions on Iran and underlined that "the Iranian regime openly advocates another Holocaust". He also claimed that Iran conducts a far more aggressive policy and does not comply with the 2015 nuclear deal. However, it seems necessary to underline that Pence's statement contradicts with the opinion of U.S. Intelligence Community, from 29 January, that Iran is not working to develop its nuclear capabilities and remains compliant with the Iran nuclear deal.

Similar confrontative speech was given by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Some experts underlined that his speech was a part of the parliamentary elections campaign which will take place in April. Moreover, Prime Minister Netanyahu also didn't participate in Munich Security Conference where Iran was confirmed among the guests.



Who arrived to Warsaw?

Representatives of more than 60 states arrived to Warsaw. Vice President Mike Pence lead the U.S. delegation and was accompanied by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. President advisor Jared Kushner and the Assistant to the American President and Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt. Representatives of 11 Middle East states as well as the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Nathenau attended the Warsaw Conference. Particular attention should be also paid to the fact that Qatari representatives appeared in Poland. Warsaw also gathered representatives from the EU states, Australia, South Korea, India, Brazil and New Zealand. Among the main EU powers only United Kingdom sent its Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt. EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini did not attend the conference. Instead she flew to Addis Ababa for African Union Summit.

Russia and Turkey did not sent any representatives to Poland. At the same time Moscow, Teheran and Ankara held a meeting in Sochi concerning Syrian conflict. Lebanon, where Shi'a Hezbollah has a strong political influence, also did not appear in Warsaw. Furthermore, Palestinian officials rejected the invitation in regard with its policy to boycott such events after U.S. decision to move its embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem.

Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA)

List of guests who appeared in Poland suggests that Warsaw conference may be one of the elements of U.S. strategic plan to create a wide anti-Iranian bloc. From Washington's point of view, such bloc requires stronger consolidation due to the ongoing reduction of American presence in the region (followed by the decision to withdraw from Syria). MESA was first announced in May 2017 as a component of a new collective security structure in the Middle East which would include, besides from the United States, Gulf Cooperation Council states (i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) as well as Egypt and Jordan.

In Washington's intention the aim of MESA is to gradually replace American regional presence without allowing China or Russia to fill a possible geopolitical void. From the American perspective such move seems to be necessary due to Russia's effective entanglement in Syrian conflict through: direct engagement at the military and strategic level (the issue of military bases and maintenance of Bashar al-Assad's regime), playing the role of a mediator (inter allia through the "Astana Process"), gaining support and creating closer relations with U.S.-allied states (Israel and Turkey), Iran's acceptance of Russia's presence in the region and the creation of alternative media narration concerning the Middle East. Some analysts also claim that MESA has the potential to become a form of Middle Eastern NATO. Moreover, besides military and political aspects, MESA tends to adopt economic and energy pillars. However, so far, involved states did not negotiate anything related to joint troops or commitments similar to NATO's Article 5.

The Israeli-Palestinian case

Initially one of the crucial topics discussed during the conference was the new U.S. proposition of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jared Kushner, advisor and son in law of Donald Trump, arrived to Warsaw to present the "Deal of the Century" concerning this issue. Some of the media have reported that Kushner worked on his 180 pages long proposal for almost 2 years. Certain elements of the deal were supposed to be revealed during the conference at the National Stadium in Warsaw whilst a full



version would be presented after the Israeli elections. Nevertheless, as Dziennik Gazeta Prawna has claimed, anonymous diplomat informed the journal that, due to the fear of potential leaks, the deal did not appear on the agenda.

According to the American media, the deal would differ from previous propositions because it would focus more on the regional aspect and link the Israeli-Palestinian case with the strategy of reducing Iran's regional influence. This is why it seems highly possible that American representatives tried to test the waters and find some common ground between Israel and Arab states that share similar stance towards Teheran.

The "Deal of the Century" was criticised by Russia. It is worth mentioning that few days earlier Russia hosted in Moscow Palestinian unity talks between Hamas and Fatah.

Why Poland?

The fact that Poland organised the conference will affect its bilateral relations with Iran. According to GUS (Polish Central Statistical Office) value of Polish export to Iran in 2017 reached 519.3 mln PLN (0,4 % of Polish export in total) and the value of import reached 359.6 mln PLN (0,06 of total value of Polish import). In March 2017, President of Polish Investment and Trade Agency Tomasz Pisula noted that Polish export to Iran rose by five times and import from Iran rose by six times. Crude oil represented 2/3 of Poland's import. The following rise in bilateral trade was mainly possible thanks to the elimination of sanctions after signing the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. Moreover, previous positive perception of Poland in Iran can change. As it was already mentioned, main Iranian journals referred to Poland in a negative manner, underlining Poland's historical "ingratitude" for the fact that Persia rescued thousands of Polish children during the World War II.

Nevertheless, it seems that Polish government accepted this fact which might be a result of Warsaw's calculation that it is far more important to strengthen its alliance with Washington. It also has to be underlined that Polish officials gained an opportunity to conduct some unofficial talks with the Americans concerning Poland's crucial interests. Poles and Americans also signed a deal for HIMARS rocket launchers. During the conference Polish officials could also continue diplomatic talks with Israeli officials concerning controversial Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) Act. However, the information published by The Jerusalem Post that Prime Minister of Israel during his visit in Poland mentioned about the alleged responsibility of Poles for Holocaust seriously damaged relations between Warsaw and Tel-Aviv.

The fact that the conference was organised in Warsaw can be also understood as a symbolic support for Donald Trump's administration and his stance on the Iranian nuclear deal which consequently would mean that Poland does not stay in line with European signatories of the deal. This is why crucial EU players didn't sent to Warsaw their high-level officials. However, by the end of the conference Polish Minister Jacek Czaputowicz noted that "Poland is, if it comes to activities concerning the nuclear deal, with European states".



It seems highly possible that Poland didn't initiate the conference. American administration informed the public opinion about the venue before the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On one hand it can be treated as a signal of Washington's trust in Warsaw. Poland is not directly engaged in any conflict in the Middle East and can be perceived as a neutral actor by the engaged states. Warsaw was also attractive due to security reasons as well as a low possibility that organised protests against the United States and its Middle Eastern allies would erupt. Nonetheless, the answer why Poland was chosen to host the conference remains anyone's guess and it will take some time to judge the consequences of this event.

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