

What Washington—and Iran—Should Take Away from the Warsaw Conference

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Brief Analysis

“Takeaways” is the classic Washington term used to encapsulate the outcomes of high-profile diplomatic gatherings. Last week, I was invited to moderate a panel at the “Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East,” cohosted in Warsaw by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Polish foreign minister Jacek Czaputowicz on February 13-14. The panel included three senior Arab officials—Saudi minister of state for foreign affairs Adel al-Jubeir, Emirati foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed, and Bahraini foreign minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. Afterward, I interviewed Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who also attended the event. These and other conversations yielded several interesting—and in many cases promising—takeaways.

First, the event was marked by a variety of convergences that should make Iran take notice. From the outset, Secretary Pompeo acknowledged the participants’ clear differences of opinion on certain regional issues, urging everyone to discuss these rifts openly and honestly as they worked to advance common positions. Regarding Iran, European ministers reemphasized that they would not walk away from the nuclear deal, yet they also embraced the need to counter unacceptable Iranian behaviors, including ballistic missile tests and threatening military actions in the Middle East.

Second, the Europeans were alarmed by the strikingly similar stories they have heard from Arab ministers and Netanyahu in describing Iran’s efforts to destabilize the region and exploit conflicts, whether by smuggling arms into Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, using Shia militias to coerce governments, providing missiles to Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, encouraging terrorism and subversion, deploying missiles on bases in Syria and western Iraq, or developing factories to build precision guidance capabilities for thousands of rockets in Lebanon and Syria. In essence, those on the frontlines of regional conflicts told their European friends that Iran will not stop fomenting trouble abroad unless its costs for doing so become far more acute. Interestingly, Arab ministers noted that sanctions are only part of the solution; in their view, creating consequences for Iran also entails unifying their own efforts, portraying a solid, collective front of opposition, and doing much more to tell the Iranian public about the costs of their government’s adventures.

Third, the Arab-Israeli strategic landscape appears to be changing, even if the “new Middle East” envisioned by the late Shimon Peres is not yet in the offing. The Warsaw meeting was not like other international gatherings or peace conferences involving top Arab and Israeli officials. Beginning with Madrid in 1991 and stretching to Annapolis in 2007, past meetings involved each side giving set-piece speeches with no real discussion or engagement. Warsaw was different: it was about moderated questions and comments, with all participants sitting in closed settings and listening to each other directly, including Arab foreign ministers and Israel’s prime minister.

For example, during a discussion of how to counter Tehran’s low-cost tactic of using Shia militias abroad, I noted that Israel had carried out more than 200 operations against Iranian and proxy forces attempting to embed themselves in Syria. When I asked one of the Arab ministers for his reaction, he stated that Israel was exercising its “right of self-defense.” Netanyahu was present for that remark and other notable statements by the seven Arab ministers in attendance, consistently agreeing with their analysis in later comments he made to me and others. This may not be normalization, but it is creating a new normal.

Fourth, while the Palestinians made clear that they do not want any “new normal” to emerge so long as nothing is happening to advance peace or alter Israel’s occupation, they lost out by boycotting the conference. Ironically, if PA officials had simply shown up, all of the Arab and European ministers would necessarily have raised Palestinian concerns, and not just in passing. Instead, the issue was just an afterthought at best, subordinated to higher-priority threats. Although the Palestinians reaffirmed their reputation as masters of defiance, they once again failed to advance their national movement—the fatal flaw of any strategy based exclusively on defiance.

Fifth, the participants showed consensus on several key Syria items. Everyone favored implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for ceasing hostilities, drafting a new constitution, and implementing a political transition over eighteen months. No surprise there, but I was struck by another point of consensus: that Russian and Iranian interests in Syria diverge, and that those differences can be exploited to limit Iran’s presence and perhaps even advance Resolution 2254. But I am deeply skeptical that these differences can be widened anytime soon, even if one ignores the fact that Bashar al-Assad has no intention of stepping aside, and that Moscow has shown no sign of curtailing its support for him. So long as Syria is undergoing even low-level insurgency, Russia will need Iranian/Shia boots on the ground.

These doubts do not detract from the other Warsaw takeaways. In the end, however, the conference’s true test will be whether it results in tangible European steps to take tougher action against Iran’s regional meddling. Participants discussed certain measures toward that end (e.g., universally designating all of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization rather than distinguishing between its political and military “wings”), but no conclusions were reached. It remains to be seen whether the working groups proposed in Warsaw are willing to convene soon and make progress on sensitive issues. In any case, unless Iran’s decisionmakers begin to see the costs—and not just the benefits—of foreign interference by the Qods Force and other organs, there is little prospect of the regime altering its behavior. ❖

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