

Russia positions itself as Middle East broker



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan meet in Sochi - REUTERS

CAIRO - 11 December 2017: In light of U.S. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel, observers believe that Trump has given Russia a chance to expand its influence in the Middle East, jumping at brokering Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Trump's decision, which includes the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, could possibly put the U.S. out of future peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel. Speculations ensued as to who would be a substitute for the U.S. as the main power player in the region.

Trump showed no sign of backtracking his decision, leaving the region enraged and thousands of Arabs protesting across the world.

The gap presumably left by the U.S. after a short-lived thaw with regional powers is now seeing Russia eager to fill the position of Middle East peace broker. On December 8, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared his deep concerns over

Washington's decision on Jerusalem, showing great interest in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Putin visited Cairo on Monday as part of a regional tour that included Syria and Turkey. During the visit, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he discussed with President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi speeding up joint steps needed to resume direct passenger flights that have halted between both states since 2015.

Egypt is looking forward to increasing Russian investment in Egypt, especially in the Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCZone), Sisi said Monday.

During a conference with Putin, Sisi signed the initial agreement to start working on the Dabaa nuclear power plant.

Putin told the Egyptian president that he would also update him on Russia's agreements with the leaderships in Turkey and Iran regarding the next steps of the political settlement in Syria.

"Everyone now looks at Moscow as the key arbiter that needs to be consulted on every major issue in the Middle East," Ilan Goldenberg, chief of staff to the U.S. special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under former President Barack Obama, told VICE News.

Political expert Abdullah El Sinawy told Egypt Today that Russia exploits the mistakes of other countries to further its relations in the Middle East for its strategic interests, as Trump's decision would harm its interests as well as the interests of European countries.

Russia has dramatically raised its profile in the region since launching a military operation in 2015 that supported Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime in the face of rebel forces and its attempts to help find a political settlement for Syria's long-running civil war.

These efforts are now led by Russia in partnership with Iran and Turkey, organizing local cease-fires and creating "de-escalation zones" to reduce the violence in Syria.

Russia also announced in November plans to host Syrian groups and government representatives for political talks on November 18, just 10 days before a new

round of U.N.-sponsored talks are to start in Geneva. Putin has courted closer ties with Egypt and NATO-member Turkey, as well as other countries in the region, in the recent years.

Besides backing different sides in the Syria war, Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met in Ankara in September. They said they wanted to see progress on the TurkStream gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant being built in Turkey in collaboration with Russia.

Russia and Egypt have had warm relations. In September, Moscow and Cairo drafted an agreement to allow each country's military to use the other's air bases.

In addition, Moscow has stood by Tehran while Trump has refused to re-certify the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers.

Across the Gulf states, King Salman of Saudi Arabia visited Moscow in October and signed multibillion-dollar energy deals with Russia.

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