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Regional Updates

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REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

CYPRUS

Recent negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders broke down without an agreement on 7 July in Switzerland. UN-backed new round of talks has been going on for 10 days in Crans-Montana, but failed to produce any positive outcome. Formally, talks cover “economy, property, European Union, territory, security and guarantees” and discussions over aforesaid six topics have been running on periodically since 2015.



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who was in the chair on the last day of the conference, said “Unfortunately, it was not possible to reach an agreement so the conference was closed without a solution to this dramatically long-lasting problem. I wish the best for both leaders of Cyprus.”

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias wrote on his Twitter account “It is not possible to accept Turkey’s right of invasion on Cyprus. The dream of resolving Cyprus problem is still alive.”

UN Special Envoy to Cyprus Espen Barth Eide said “Turkey has always indicated that they cannot accept the idea of zero guarantees and zero troops.”

Regarding inconclusive talks, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated “For the past 15 years, although Annan Plan was rejected by Greek side in 2004, Turkish side gave all its constructive stance for a fair and a sustainable solution. For both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot side, it is not acceptable for troops to be withdrawn.”

After the last failed talks, Greek Cypriot Leader Anastasiades criticised Turkey for its unacceptable demands. He asserted “withdrawal of Turkish troops in the island and cancellation of guarantee agreement are a must to start negotiations.” He added that, “our aim is to settle a sovereign state which is independent from third countries.” He also highlighted Greek side will continue its research on natural gas in Cyprus.

On July 12, Turkish Cypriot Leader Akıncı said, “this is a 50-year long process, TRNC has been putting all its efforts into unification since November. Both Greek and Turkish sides have showed tolerance far better in this process. In this point, Greek Cypriots should have left ‘zero guarantees zero troops’ aside.”

On the other hand, Greece Prime Minister Aleksis Tsipras “Turkish side should give up on intervention, to achieve a solution guarantees need to be repealed and Turkish troops need to leave the island.” He also claimed that operating natural gas in the island is a sovereign right of Southern Cyprus.

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On July 13, a drill ship was sent to southern side of the island for natural gas diggings for the sake of French company Total and Italian company ENI. Turkey asserts every time that TRNC has right over potential natural gas resources in the island.

The day after, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım warned Southern Cyprus for its moves to explore for energy around the eastern Mediterranean were “untimely and dangerous”, adding that Ankara would continue to protect the rights and interests of Turkish Cypriots.

On July 18, the proposal excluding the presence of Turkish troops in Cyprus was out of question, EU Minister Ömer Çelik said at the Turkey-EU Joint Consultative Committee meeting in Brussels, as he criticized Greek Cypriots for blocking 14 negotiation chapters in Turkey's EU accession process.

Cyprus marks 20 July the 43rd anniversary of the island's 1974 invasion by Turkish forces, which is also known as Cyprus Peace Operation and is celebrated in the northern Cyprus as well as in Turkey.

On July 24, UN Special Envoy on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide said that “Turkish side accepted the removal of guarantees but not the withdrawal of Turkish troops” which is a reverse statement of Greek claims. He said the process was now in “a cooling off phase”.

“The UN remains committed to supporting a process on the existing parameters for a solution of the Cyprus issue.” Eide said.

On July 27, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker posted a letter to both Akıncı and Anastasiades in which it was written that the European Commission would continue to help the parties in the effort to reach a settlement. He stressed his support for the parties on the island.

On July 31, Anastasiades stated “we will continue our unification efforts on the basis of UN only if we need to get rid of Turkey's rights of guarantee and invasion. This has always been our approach.”

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

EGYPT

On 5 July, Egypt's parliament approved a new law to create a National Electoral Commission (NEC). The NEC will be responsible for supervising elections and referendums in Egypt. The new law establishing the NEC brings to an end the full supervision of elections by judicial bodies and completely eliminates them.



On 7 July, at least 23 Egyptian soldiers were killed with 33 others injured. Alleged Islamic state terrorists attacked army checkpoints with car bombs in North Sinai triggering clashes that left at least 40 of the Islamic state militants also dead.

On 17 July, Egypt's foreign ministry announced the end of visa-free travel for Qataris. It is the latest measure adopted by Cairo against Doha in the Gulf Crisis that began in June. "It does not make sense to keep making exceptions for Qatar and giving it privileges in light of its current positions," indicated Ahmed Abu Zeid, Egypt's foreign ministry spokesperson. The restriction will however not apply to spouses and children of Egyptian nationals as well as Qatari nationals who are studying at Egyptian public universities, Abu Zeid mentioned.

On 22 July, a Cairo-based criminal court sentenced 28 people involved in the 2015 killing of Egypt's top prosecutor to death. 15 others also received jail sentences of 25 years each. Egypt's Grand Mufti approved the sentences, however, they can be appealed. Public prosecutor Hisham Barakat was killed in a car bomb attack on his convoy in Cairo. At the time, Egypt blamed The Muslim Brotherhood and the Gaza-based Hamas militants for the incident, both however, denied the claim.

On 27 July, Egypt established a national council for combatting terrorism. According to the presidential decree, the council will have a wide mandate to set policies aimed at "fighting extremism". Egypt has been battling against Islamic State militants in the Sinai Peninsula since 2013. The council is chaired by Egyptian President Abdul Fattah el-Sisi. Other members are the head of parliament, the prime minister, the head of the Al-Azhar alongside selected ministers. Among their tasks include the formulation of a "comprehensive national strategy" to combat terrorism and "proposing amendments to existing legislation". It is also tasked to create job opportunities in areas with high levels of extremism and encourage moderate religious discourse.

REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

On 5 July, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu, as he became the first Indian leader to visit Israel since the two countries established full diplomatic relations. This time, Modi's decision not to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas prompted some criticism. Yet, Modi met Abbas in New Delhi in May.



Palestinian Deputy Foreign Minister Tasir Jaradat told Al Jazeera “We expected Modi to visit both Israel and Palestine to play an important role between the two sides and to be able to spread the message of peace, one should visit both.”

On 9 July, U.S. President Donald Trump expressed his confidence on a successful Israel-Palestine peace talks. A White House official indicated an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is Trump's top priority. President Trump visited Israel in late May.

On July 13, according to U.S. Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt, Israelis and Palestinians reached a water-sharing deal about a quarter of its annual water needs at a reduced rate. Palestinians suffers from water shortages, which is also a political issue between the two parties. The U.S., Israeli and Palestinian negotiators hope the deal could also pave way for a return to negotiations between the two sides, after talks collapsed in 2014.

On July 14, Israeli police closed and cancelled Friday noon prayers in the al-Aqsa Mosque; according to Al Jazeera. They detained Jerusalem's top Muslim leader after three Palestinians and two Israeli police officers were killed in a gun battle in the mosque compound. This increased the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. A religious official at al-Aqsa said that “Forbidding the Friday prayer is an unfair procedure.”

On July 16, French President Emmanuel Macron met Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Paris. After their meetings, Macron expressed his support for long-stalled negotiations of two-state solution and his wishes for “Israel and Palestine, living in recognised, secure borders with Jerusalem as the capital.”

Mass prayer gatherings had been held in the streets and demonstrations against the measures rise later on July 14th. Tension between two sides prompted by Israelis restrictive measures putting metal detectors at the entrance of al-Aqsa mosque. Palestinians living in the West Bank prayed outside the mosque along the streets.

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This move followed by series of security cabinet meetings and pressure of international criticism of Israel. After two weeks of clashes, Israelis decided to remove metal detectors from the gate of al-Aqsa mosque and replaced it with more advanced surveillance cameras. Palestinians were able to come back to the holy site to worship for the first time in a two-week time. However, men under the age of 50 were banned from al-Aqsa. This announcement renewed the clashes, resulting to injury of more than 100 people according to Al-Jazeera.

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

LIBYA

On 2 July, Martin Kobler was replaced as Head of the UN Mission in Libya by Ghassan Salame, former Lebanese Minister of Culture.

On 4 July, the UN Refugee Agency called on the UN Sanctions Committee to extend international sanctions on the sale of weapons to Libya to include financial and travel bans on human smugglers and traffickers responsible for violations against refugees and migrants. Commenting on the need for the sanctions, Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean said, “we need absolutely to take radical action” in order to cease the gross violation of human rights in Libya.



On 15 July, Benghazi International Airport was officially reopened for commercial flights with heavy security presence. The airport has been closed for over three years due to fighting in the city.

On 27 July, Libya’s UN-backed Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Eastern Libya Army Commander General Khalifa Haftar agreed to a conditional ceasefire and elections in Paris. Both leaders agreed to “commit to a ceasefire and to refrain from any use of armed force for any purpose that does not strictly constitute counter-terrorism.” The talks was hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron to “facilitate a political agreement between the two rival leaders.” The meeting in Paris is the first contact between the two leaders after an earlier meeting between same in Abu Dhabi in May.

On 30 July, a committee tasked with writing a constitution for Libya voted in favor of a draft. This paved the way for parliament to approve a referendum triggering an uproar among opponents. Critics including people in favor of the country’s 1951 constitution have called for a redo of the vote. According to Amraja Noah, a committee member from the eastern city of Tobruk, protesters raided the building of the committee meeting to stop the session. This, he indicated, forced members to rush the vote. He added that 44 members attended the session with 42 voting in favor of passing the draft.

Meanwhile, an opponent of the decision Abdelkader Kadura, a committee member from Benghazi expressed skepticism about the legitimacy of the voting. According to him, the vote serves a “small minority and a certain geographical area”. The Committee has 60 members and have been assigned to work on a draft constitution since 2014.

REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

SYRIA

On 3 July, the UN Refugee Agency indicated that nearly half a million displaced Syrians have returned to their homes since the beginning of 2017. The UNHCR spokesperson, Anrej Mahecic said that among those who have returned include 440,000 internally displaced people and more than 31,000 from neighboring countries. He added that most are returning to Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Homs. Mahecic further cautioned that, “Conditions for refugees to return to safety and dignity are not yet in place in Syria”.



On 4 July, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres appointed Catherine Marchi-Uhel to lead UN’s investigative team looking into possible war crimes and other violations of international law in Syria since 2011. Marchi-Uhel who is a French legal expert and former judge is charged to lead the “International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism” (IIIM), the official name given to the group in a resolution passed by the General Assembly in 2016.

On 5 July, the fifth round of Syria Talks opened in Kazakhstan. Both representatives from the Syrian government and the opposition groups convened in Astana to discuss ways of ending the conflict with focus on plans to solidify the proposed “de-escalation zones.” Russia, Turkey and Iran were the co-sponsors of the talks. Other backers include the UN Special Representative for Syria, Staffan de Mistura as well as delegations from Jordan and the United States. A member of the High Negotiations Committee, Riyad Nassan Agha indicated that, the opposition saw Iran as a “hostile state”, and the country’s participation at the negotiations will undermine UN-led peace talks in Geneva.

Subsequently, the talks stalled according to Russia chief negotiator Alexander Lavrentiev. The logistics of how the policing and delineation of the four agreed “de-escalation zones” would operate still “needed finalizing” according to, Lavrentiev. He further added that, there had been no specific agreement on particular forces that would police the zones; this was after reports that members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would be called upon by Moscow to deploy protection forces in the safe zones. Turkey, Russia and Iran have agreed to hold the next round of talks in the final week of August.

World Bank’s July report indicated that Syria’s six-year conflict has cost the Syrian economy \$226 billion; this figure is around four times its GDP in 2010. In a statement, World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa Hafez Ghanem indicated that, “the war in Syria is tearing apart the social and economic fabric of the country.” He further added that, “the number of casualties is

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devastating and the war is also destroying the institutions and systems that societies need to function and repairing them will be a great challenge than rebuilding infrastructure.” The report estimated a loss of around 538,000 jobs annually in 2011-14 with around 9 million Syrians of working age, thus, more than two out of four people unemployed and not enrolled in any form of school or vocational training.

On 17 July, the seventh round of Geneva Peace Talks closed without any serious address of a political transition in Syria. Staffan de Mistura, UN Syria envoy said that, the Syrian government avoided discussions on a political transition and instead focused on talks about fighting terrorism, a topic, which was added to the formal agenda earlier in 2017. The main opposition on the other hand criticized the absence of any real attempt to address a political transition during these talks.

Commenting on the issue, Nasser al-Hariri, the lead opposition negotiator mentioned that, “the political process is in danger because, after all these rounds, the international community does not put enough pressure on the regime and its allies to engage fully in the negotiation. The next round of talks is scheduled for September.

Global Political Trends Center (GPoT Center) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution established under the auspices of Istanbul Kültür University in 2009.

GPoT Center was founded with the aim to support reconciliation and non-violent solutions to international as well as domestic issues through dialogue. Our mission is to contribute to stability, democratization and peace through organizing multitrack diplomacy meetings, conducting innovative and independent research, and encouraging informed debates in the media on key issues affecting Turkey and the world.

GPoT Center serves as a platform for the free exchange of views and information on political, social and economic matters concerning a variety of parties and segments of society. We aim to achieve our mission by routinely bringing together opinion leaders, government officials, policy makers, analysts, scholars, experts and members of the media from Turkey and abroad.

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