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Regional Updates

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CYPRUS

Since negotiations failed in Crans-Montana in July, new talks will be held after the elections in both sides of Cyprus at the beginning of 2018. Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades indicated that he expects new initiatives for the continuation of Talks with the support of international dialogue after the presidential elections on February 2018 in Cyprus.



The Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) in Cyprus and Head of UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) Elizabeth Spehar attended the 13th Annual Cyprus Summit held in Nicosia on 1-2 November. She noted that courageous and determined leadership is critical to successful peace processes in Cyprus. She mentioned the role of leaders at the negotiating table as well as the fact that the importance of a Cypriot-led process could not be underestimated. “What people say is important, thus the process needs to involve the people.” Spehar added.

On 6 November, France President Emmanuel Macron met Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades in Paris regarding the two countries’ ties in defence and energy. Macron said that his government fully supports the operations of the French energy giant Total in Cyprus’ exclusive economic zone. He stressed their bilateral relations and economic cooperation, as well as his willingness to further enhance them. Anastasiades said he informed Macron of Cyprus’ active role in the region for the promotion of cooperation, peace and stability.

On 13 November, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Foreign Minister Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu met the Head of Turkish Journalism Association (TGF) Yılmaz Karaca.

Ertuğruloğlu blamed UN for unresolved negotiation talks as a waste of 50-year. He added that, after the general elections in TRNC in 2018, they need to talk to officials in Turkey about what is needed to be done as further steps in the island.

On 15 November, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus marked the 34th anniversary of independence declaration. Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı attended the ceremony in Nicosia and addressed the attendees, “It should be known that Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots would live together in Cyprus. A solution without the permission of the Turkish people is not acceptable”. He added that, “It was out of question for Turkish side to wait another 50 years for a solution.”

On 20 November, Egypt President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades and Greece President Alexis Tsipras met in Nicosia for the fifth time. In the tripartite summit, several topics were tackled, including coordination between the three countries, as well as enhancing

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the relations in the political, economic, trade, security and tourism fields. The main topic was the routes for potential natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On 24 November, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı paid an official visit to London in order to meet representatives of civil society organizations and to address Turkish citizens living in London. Akıncı evaluated the current political situation in the island and indicated that Turkish Cypriots do not want these two things: “first, being a minority in the island and being an 82nd province of Turkey. We will live either under the same roof equally or in two different roofs.” Akıncı added that, “Today is more difficult to solve the problem of Cyprus compared to the conditions in 2004. Mentality change on the Greek side is needed.”

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EGYPT

On 6 November, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called on Middle Eastern countries to maintain stability in reference to tensions between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. “The stability of the region is very important and we all have to protect it...I am talking to all the parties in the region to preserve it”, Al-Sisi indicated in an interview with CNBC.



When quizzed whether it was time Egypt considered its own measures against Hezbollah, Al-Sisi said that, “the subject was not about taking on or not taking on, the subject was about the status of the fragile stability in the region in light of the unrest facing the region”. The region cannot support more turmoil, he added.

On 7 November, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi met with his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas in the Egyptian city of El-Sheikh. The Egyptian Presidency Spokesperson, Bassam Rady said that, the two discussed the latest developments in the Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation issue alongside ways to revive the peace process.

“Egypt will continue its efforts to resume the peace talks between the Palestinian Authority and Israel until reaching a just and comprehensive solution that ensures the Palestinians’ right to establish an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital”, Al-Sisi said as quoted by Rady.

On 9 November, President Al-Sisi indicated in a news conference that Islamic State militants were heading towards his country through Libya after the extremist group was defeated in Syria and Iraq. Egypt has been battling Islamic State affiliates in its northern Sinai Peninsula for the last three years and has recently seen attacks in its western desert region, which borders Libya.

On developments concerning Ethiopia’s construction of what would be Africa’s largest dam on River Nile’s main tributary, Al-Sisi said that, Egypt viewed positively the developmental needs of Ethiopia, however, water was not merely a question of development, it was a matter of life and death. He added that, Egypt was capable of protecting its national security and water to Egypt was a question of national security too.

On 15 November, the Egyptian Court of Cassation in Cairo upheld a life sentence passed in 2016 against Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie over deadly clashes following former president Mohamed Morsi’s ouster. The court also confirmed three-year jail sentences against 19 defendants and ten-year terms against 29 others over clashes in the city of Ismailiya that killed three people.

On 17 November, Egyptian officials indicated that the country’s border crossing with the Gaza Strip, the Rafah crossing was to be reopened for the first time since Hamas ceded control of its side

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of the crossing to the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority. Rafah crossing was scheduled to reopen for three days for humanitarian reasons.

On 24 November, at least 235 worshippers were killed when gunmen attacked Al-Rawdah mosque in Egypt's North Sinai during Friday prayers. A Statement from the Prosecutor-General's Office added that 109 people were also injured. Prosecutor-General Nabil Sadek ordered that Ismailia prosecutors and high state prosecutors be deployed to the scene to carry out needed investigations.

Meanwhile, on 29 November, President Al-Sisi gave the Egyptian military three months to bring stability in Sinai after the mosque attack. He said that, the troops were permitted to use "all brute force" to defeat the Wilayat Sinai, an affiliate of the Islamic State in the region.

President Al-Sisi gave this order to Chief of Staff, General Mohammed Farid Hegazy during a televised meeting. "You are responsible for restoring security and stability in Sinai, along with the Ministry of Interior, within three months," Al-Sisi said and added that, "all brute force will be used, all brute force".

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

2 November marks 100 years of the Balfour Declaration, which was issued by Britain's then-Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour in 1917. This statement offered Britain's support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people".



UK Prime Minister Theresa May and Israel President Benjamin Netanyahu attended a ceremony in London upon the anniversary. May indicated that she was, "proud of our pioneering role in the creation of the state of Israel." On the other hand, for the Palestinian people, this anniversary means a "100 years of dispossession". Palestinian politicians demand an apology on this historical injustice against them.

On 8 November, UK International Development Secretary Priti Patel resigned over undisclosed meetings with Israeli officials. Allegedly, Patel had meetings with Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu, Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan and Foreign Ministry official Yuval Rotem. It was also alleged that Priti Patel was trying to reduce the UK's annual aid budget for Palestine.

On 20 November, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz spoke on the Israeli Army radio station and revealed that Israel had had covert contacts with Saudi Arabia. Steinitz indicated that, Israel has mutual concerns over Iran. "We have ties that are indeed partly covert with many Muslim and Arab countries, and usually we are the party that is not ashamed", he added.

On 21 November, the United States' threat that it will shut Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Office in Washington unless it enters direct peace negotiations with Israel. US officials said they act according to enforce the law. US President Donald Trump has three months to consider whether the Palestinians are in "direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel." On the other hand, PLO Secretary General Saeb Erekat announced that the Palestinian Authority would cut all communications with the United States if the licensing process for the office in Washington were not renewed.

On 28 November, Israel Social Equality Minister Gila Gamliel claimed that, "Egypt's Sinai peninsula is the best place for establishing an alternative homeland for the State of Palestine." "The Palestinian state will only be established on the land of Palestine" Hamas spokesman Ebu Zuhri said in a statement. Gamliel's statement has invited anger from Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry who responded that, "Egypt will never sacrifice even a sliver of land in Sinai Peninsula and will not let anyone to attack it"

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LIBYA

On 12 November, the UN Special Envoy to Libya Ghassan Salame met with the UN-backed Prime Minister Fayeza Serraj in Tripoli to discuss a political solution of the country's crisis. Per the Prime Minister's media office, the meeting discussed "the latest development of the political solution and the next phase of the road map proposed by Salame, which will lead to presidential and parliamentary elections".



In other developments, Beida-based Prime Minister Abdullah Al-Thinni ordered the suspension and arrest of mayors and councilors from areas allegedly under his control who had been in contact with the UN-backed Presidency Council's Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli and headed by Serraj.

On 15 November, an exclusive CNN report brought to light the plight of migrants being sold into slavery in Libya. Some victims of Libya's slave trade testified to the United Nations on their experiences. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) corroborated these claims by establishing that Libya's slave trade as The Guardian wrote "had become so normalized that people are being traded in public".

Subsequently, the African Union, European Union and United Nations alongside several countries condemned the activities and called for immediate investigation into the slave trade activities. Responding to the issue, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that "slavery has no place in our world and these actions are among the most egregious abuses of human rights."

Furthermore, officials of the UN, EU and the AU agreed to an emergency plan to dismantle people smuggling networks and repatriate stranded migrants in an effort to ease the human rights disaster in Libya.

On 16 November, UN's Libya Envoy, Ghassan Salame briefed the Security Council (UNSC) on the latest developments with regards to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) and his action plan. He indicated that his action plan's second stage was a national conference, which had been proposed to be held in February with the intention of gathering all Libyan political stakeholders without exception.

Salame added that, the Libyan High National Elections Commission has begun devising a timeline for the proposed polls in the country. He further reiterated that, whether the current efforts aimed at the amendment of the LPA succeeded or not, the LPA will remain fixed in place.

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Subsequently, Libya's House of Representatives (HoR) voted in favor of UN's new action plan which gives new life to stalled political talks and aims at healing divisions within Libya.

Abdullah Ablahig, Spokesman for the Tobrouk-based Libyan HoR told The Associated Press that parliament convened and gave its consensus to new UN Envoy Ghassan Salame's road map, a decision which the UNSMIL welcomed.

According to the new plan, Libya would have a smaller presidential council with fewer authorities while a new government would be formed before a national conference was held in Libya. The new plan also paves the way for future parliamentary and presidential elections

On 17 November, Adurrahman Swehli, the head of Libya's Higher Council of State said that, the Council would discuss the possibility of holding early elections within six months if Libya's political agreement fails. Swehli made the remarks during a meeting with Bettina Muscheidt, EU's Ambassador to Libya in Tripoli where the pair discussed the latest political and security developments in Libya.

On 21 November, the US military launched new airstrikes against Islamic State militants in Libya. US Africa Command Spokesperson Robyn Mack said the airstrikes occurred near Fuqaha "in coordination with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA)".

"We are committed to maintaining pressure on the terror network and preventing them from establishing a safe haven," Mack said. The military carried out about 500 airstrikes last year against Islamic State fighters in Sirte. In January, armed drones and B-2 bombers attacked Islamic State training camps in Libya, killing more than 80 militants.

SYRIA

On 1 November, Russia indicated its intention of a congress to be held in the Russian city of Sochi among Syria's rival parties. The congress according to Russia sought to bring the Syrian government and its opponents together to discuss a political settlement and constitutional reforms. This proposal was the main outcome of the seventh round of peace talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana where Russia, Turkey and Iran released a joint statement which pledged to bring Syrian groups together to negotiate a political solution for Syria. This proposal however drew mixed reactions from the international community and local actors.



For instance, Germany dismissed Russia's initiative. "It was the height of cynicism that, of all countries, Russia and Iran, which fuelled the civil war in Syria in their own interest, causing the deaths of thousands of people, now want to develop a political vision for Syria's future", Juergen Hardt, Foreign Policy Speaker for Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives in parliament said.

The Syrian opposition, on its part said that the proposed congress did not serve the political process, and called on the international community to focus instead on UN-sponsored peace talks in Geneva. Alise Mofrie, a senior member of the opposition's Higher Negotiations Committee indicated that Russia's proposal undermined the UN-mediated Geneva talks by creating "tactical and destructive" parallel tracks.

Ahmed Ramadan, another opposition member added that Russian invite "bypasses" the UN and the existing UN resolutions. If Russia was serious about supporting the political process, it should pressure Assad's regime to stop its crimes and to participate in serious and direct negotiations in Geneva, Ramadan said.

On 7 November, the US Defense Secretary said that he backed a diplomatic solution for the Syrian conflict as the Islamic State neared defeat in Syria. Speaking to reporters in Geneva, he said, "basically, we were trying to get this into diplomatic mode so we could sort this out and make certain that minorities, whoever they were, were not subjected to what we've seen under the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

On 8 November, an adviser to President Bashar al-Assad rejected the prospect of a federal project in Syria that would grant Kurdish groups greater autonomy from the central government. "There cannot be discussion on the division or cutting up of a part of the country or on so-called federalism", Bouthaina Shaaban told Lebanese al-Mayadeem TV.

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Shaaban's comments contradict a statement by Syria's Foreign Minister in September, when he indicated that the government was open to negotiations with the Kurds over their demand for autonomy within unified Syria. Shaaban added that the statement by Walid al-Moallem had been misinterpreted. "I don't think any government could discuss with any group when it came to the topic of the country's unity", she said.

On 21 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that his country's military operations in Syria were coming to an end. "Regarding our joint operation to fight terrorists in Syria, this military operation is indeed coming to an end", he said during surprise talks with President Bashar al-Assad in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

On 21 November, Riad Hijab, a top High Negotiation Committee (HNC) negotiator for nearly two years announced his resignation two days prior to the opposition convening in Riyadh to come up with a unified delegation and negotiating stance in preparation for UN-led peace talks in Geneva. Subsequent to his resignation, at least two other HNC officials also announced that they would withdraw from the committee. Meanwhile, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Hijab's resignation would help Syria unify its opposition on a more constructive platform.

On 22 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Donald Trump discussed political settlement for Syria in a phone call. According to the Kremlin, Putin briefed Trump on his meeting with Assad. He said that, the Syrian leader had confirmed his commitment to the political process, and conducting constitutional reform and presidential and parliamentary elections.

Putin also informed Trump of "the need to keep Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity intact". A political settlement, the Russian president said, should be hammered out in an inclusive "internal negotiating process." Meanwhile, a statement released by the White House said the two leaders stressed the importance of UN-led peace talks in resolving the Syrian conflict. Neither the Kremlin nor the White House made any mention of discussions over Assad's future.

On 23 November, the Syrian opposition selected a new chief negotiator to head unified delegation to peace talks with the Syrian government in Geneva. "Nasr al-Hariri, new head of the opposition High Negotiations Committee, was picked to lead a 36-member negotiating team for the talks on November 28. The opposition delegation included various opposition groups such as the HNC, the largest bloc, in addition to the Cairo and Moscow-based opposition platforms.

Hariri replaces Riad Hijab, former head of the HNC, who resigned because of what he said were attempts to force the opposition to come to terms with Assad's survival. Opposition groups still maintained that President Assad has no role in a transitional period under a UN-sponsored peace deal.

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On 29 November, the eighth round of peace talks opened in Geneva with a meeting between the Syrian opposition and UN Special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura. The Syrian government joined a day later. It was the first time the Syrian opposition had a unified delegation. The goal was to enter into negotiations that will lead to clear path for a political settlement of the Syrian conflict.

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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