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Regional Updates

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Regional Updates: Contents

Cyprus.....4

Egypt.....5

Libya.....6

Syria.....8

CYPRUS

The first week of January was especially busy diplomatically for the future of Cyprus just a week before the five-party summit that would be held in Geneva between 9-12 January. The leaders held several meetings in Athens, Ankara and New York. As the last stop before Geneva, on 5 January, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu met with the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) António Guterres in UN Headquarters in New York to discuss current issues including Cyprus. Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu also met with UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide as they prepared for next week's conference on Cyprus in Geneva.



On 6 January, the diplomatic contacts continued as the UNSG António Guterres met with Greek Foreign Minister who also held a meeting with Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu before the Cyprus talks. While the meetings were being held, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Theresa May held a telephone talk with the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to discuss the opportunity to secure a better future for Cyprus and guarantee stability in the wider region.

Following these diplomatic contacts, the highly-anticipated Summit started on 9 January in Geneva with the support of the political leaders from all around the world. On the first day of the Conference, the parties discussed the property and power sharing issues. On 11 January, the Cypriot leaders presented their respective maps on the territorial chapter, while on 12 January, the conference of Cyprus was convened with the delegates of the guarantor countries; Turkey, Greece and the UK, and other relevant parties, which laid emphasis on the security and guarantee chapter. In a press conference on 12 January, UNSG António Guterres said that Cyprus can be “2017's big hope”. He added that, he hopes that there would be a breakthrough on Cyprus talks.

Also, UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide highlighted that whatever the result would be, this conference will always be a historical one as it convened the Cypriot leaders and all the guarantor countries' representatives all together for the first time. On 18 January, the Geneva Conference continued in Mont Pèlerin at a technical level with all relevant parties selecting technical staff to represent them. The working groups discussed the security and guarantees issue of the Cyprus problem. According to the Cyprus News Agency, the Greek Cypriot spokesperson Nikos Christodoulides said in a reference to the talks in Mont Pèlerin that they had great importance, but the important decisions will be made on a political level and added that there is no timeframe for the resumption of the conference on Cyprus.

On 19 January, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım said during a speech to the press that Turkey's guarantees are not an issue of discussion, Sigma News Agency reported. According to the same source, the Turkish Cypriots in coordination with Turkey conveyed their concerns regarding

REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

the secession option and the absence of protection in case of violations of the constitution by the Greek Cypriot side as well.

On 26 January, Cyprus Mail reported that in a speech to the press, Tuğrul Türkeş, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister said that Turkey wants its citizens to enjoy the four freedoms in Cyprus (i.e. freedom of movement for goods, services, capital and persons), after a solution. The demand had been presented during the negotiations. Türkeş also added that Ankara would make a move on guarantees when its demands were agreed.

Also on 26 January, Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades met with Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı for the first time since the conference in Switzerland. After the meeting, Anastasiades said that the statements made by Tuğrul Türkeş were unacceptable and added that these kind of statements only succeed in creating a negative climate. According to the Cyprus Mail, upon his arrival to his office, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı said that what they did with Anastasiades in the past 20 months had never been achieved in the past 50 years of negotiations and warned against pushing the process in the wrong direction in haste saying “we must safeguard this balance.” The Cypriot leaders will continue the talks in Cyprus, focusing on all six chapters and subsequently meet to decide on further procedures.

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

EGYPT

On 2 January, the Egyptian Army destroyed 12 smuggling tunnels linking the Gaza Strip to the Sinai Peninsula according to army spokesman Tamer al-Rifae.

On 11 January, an Egyptian court froze the assets of Mozn Hassan, Director of the Nazra for Feminist Studies; Mohamed Zaree, Head of the Arab Penal Reform Organization; and Atef Hafez, Director of the Arab organization for Judicial Reform. Britain, European Union and the US Department of State said this is troubling and continues a worrying trend of restricting space for civil society to operate in Egypt. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry however complained that, critiques on the ruling are interferences in the country's affairs.



On 16 January, Egypt's top administrative court upheld a ruling voiding a government agreement to hand over two Red Sea Islands, Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia stating they were sovereign Egyptian territories.

On 21 January, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said in a Cairo conference on Libya that, the Skhirat Agreement is the "ideal solution" to the Libyan crisis. He added there should be active participation of all Libyan factions to end the current crisis.

At the end of January, the Egyptian and Turkish business forum called on the two countries to boost their economic relationship. President of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, Rifat Hisarcıklioğlu said they are committed to increasing Turkish investment and exports to Egypt. According to Hisarcıklioğlu, the number of Turkish firms operating in Egypt has increased over the past 15 years, while overall Turkish investment in the country has grown to a current \$5 billion. This has helped create 60,000 job opportunities for Egyptians. Federation of Egyptian Chamber of Commerce (FEDCOC) Chairman Ahmed al-Wakeel, on the other hand said Egypt will remain Turkey's gateway to Africa.

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

LIBYA

At the beginning of January, the spokesperson of the Third Force of the Government of National Accord tasked to secure the south, Mohamed Glewan, said they were circling the airbase of Barak Al-Shati, where pro-Haftar's Operation Dignity was positioned under the leadership of Muhammed Ben Nayel. The recent move followed clashes in Barak Al-Shati airbase in southern Libya.



The Third Force was in control of the airbase before they withdrew in December 2016. Pro-Haftar forces led by Ben Nayel took control in order to position themselves in the south and subsequently wage war all the way down to Tripoli according to the Libya Express. Pro-Haftar forces are led by General Khalifa Haftar, a marshal and principal commander in eastern Libya who has refused to recognize the UN-backed Government of National Accord.

One of three deputy premiers in Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) has resigned. He indicated he had failed in his mission. Moussa al-Kouni told a press conference in Tripoli that he could no longer stay in the post. "I'm resigning because I have failed," he said. He is from southern Libya and represents the Tuareg minority in the GNA.

On 3 January, Pro-Skhirat Agreement Tobruk MPs rejected the latest Presidential Council (PC) decisions. The PC decision saw certain figures appointed to high profile state posts. However, Mousa Al-Kouni, a House of Representative member who subsequently resigned cited the appointments as political bribery that could lead to the collapse of the political agreement.

On 4 January, the Head of the UN Mission in Libya, Martin Kobler urged all parties to act in restraint and to resolve issues through peaceful dialogue. This followed concerns of escalating tensions in central Libya according to the UN News Centre.

On 7 January, Chadian Prime Minister Albert Pahimi Padackert ordered the closure of his country's border with Libya to prevent Islamic State terrorists crossing over according to the Libyan Herald.

On 12 January, Italy reopened its embassy in Tripoli; in doing so it is the first western country since 2015 pursuant to Libya's conflict. Turkey has also reopened its embassy in the capital subsequently.

On 26 January, according to Al Jazeera, forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar took over one of the last remaining strongholds of the al-Qaeda linked group in eastern city of Benghazi, Qanfouda. Jamal al-Zahawi, a Libyan National Army (LNA) commander confirmed this to Libya Channel.

REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

SYRIA

A major highlight in the month of January with regards to the Syrian conflict was the Astana Talks. The meeting was held on 23rd and 24th in Astana, Kazakhstan, among Russia, Turkey, Iran, and a delegation from the Syrian government and Syrian opposition forces including some armed factions.

Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari headed the 10-member government delegation which included figures from the military and the Syrian judiciary according to Al-Watan. The rebel coalition was headed by Mohammad Alloush, a leading figure in the Jaish al-Islam faction.

Moscow indicated it had extended invitations to all opposition fighting groups excluding the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The Syrian Democratic Council however said it did not receive an invitation according to spokesperson Talal Selo.

Alloush maintained the aim of the opposition in Astana was the strengthening of the ceasefire agreement. The three major countries, Russia, Turkey and Iran pledged to uphold the ceasefire in Syria despite opposition's concerns over Tehran's role in monitoring the truce in a joint-trilateral statement.

The three major countries also agreed that opposition groups that participated in the Astana Talks would take part in the new round of United Nations-led peace talks in Geneva subsequently. Irrespective of this stance by the three major countries, Osama Abu Zaid, a legal adviser to the Free Syrian Army indicated that opposition participation in the Geneva talks depended on whether their demands presented in the Astana Talks were met.

Also, Yahya al-Aridi, one of the opposition leaders indicated that the Syrian government had not demonstrated serious commitment to the ceasefire which began on December 30, 2016. He added there should be clarity before any direct negotiations with the opposition.

The joint trilateral statement further stated that the Syrian government and opposition agreed to jointly fight against the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front and to separate them from armed groups. However, groups which were to be excluded from the ceasefire, were not mentioned.

Rebel representatives have maintained that, the success of the talks hinged on removal of all foreign militias from Syria and the capacity of Moscow and Ankara to ensure that Iran abides by the agreement.



REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

With regards to the truce details, both Jaafari and UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura could not furnish the specificities on how the newly established three-way mechanism would solidify the ceasefire and prevent further violence. De Mistura, however, reiterated UN's commitment to assist the 'trilateral mechanism' and ensure that it aids in the strengthening of the truce.

The talks signified part of the latest diplomatic efforts to end Syria's six years of conflict which has devastated the country and left over half a million dead. The Syrian government negotiator Bashar al-Jaafari indicated that the Talks succeeded in attaining the goal of consolidating the cessation of hostilities for a fixed period, thus paving way for dialogue between Syrians.

Additionally, a proposed draft constitution of Syria was presented by Russia during the talks but was not accepted even though Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister claimed it had sought the opinions from all sides of the Syrian conflict. Opposition figures maintained that, a foreign power could not write the constitution of Syria.

In the closing remarks of the Talks, the sides agreed that "there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict and it can only be solved through a political process based on the implementation of the U.N. Security Council resolution 2254 in its entirety."

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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