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# Regional Updates

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## REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

### CYPRUS

On 5 December, Energy Ministers of Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Southern Cyprus to build world's longest underwater natural gas pipeline from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. The Project, known as East Med, is expected to be completed by 2025. The initial cost of the pipeline is around 6 billion dollars, estimated to transport 12-16 billion cubic metres of gas per year. Energy specialists claim that this would be safer and more economic if it passes over Ceyhan terminal of Turkey.



On 11 December, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was interviewed by Greek newspaper ToVima during his visit to Greece. Erdoğan highlighted that, "Greek Cypriots still recognize Cyprus as a Greek island, but Turkish Cypriots are equal partners and they will never be a minority in the island. If Greek Cypriots do not accept the fact that Turkish Cypriots are politically equal, negotiation talks will always remain inconclusive."

On 12 December, Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister who is Responsible for Cyprus Affairs Recep Akdağ indicated that they expected a democratic election would take place in Cyprus. "We would like to have peace in the island, we want a solution that is fair and equal."

On 28 December, the drilling activities in the "exclusive economic zone" declared by the Greek Cypriot side unilaterally continued. At the same time, Turkey's seismic research vessel "Barbaros" was sent to the area. Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Foreign Affairs Ministry made a written statement saying, "The Turkish Cypriot side must have an equal position in taking all decisions regarding the exploration, extraction and operation of hydrocarbon resources. It is unacceptable when Greek side take actions disregarding Turkish side."

On 29 December, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı commented over reunification talks "No one should expect from us to wait another fifty years to solve the issue. Turkish Cypriots do not deserve to live under embargoes."

A total of nine candidates submitted their candidacies on December 29. The Presidential election in the Southern side of the island will take place on January 28. The election of the new President of the Republic covers the period from 2018 to 2023.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

### EGYPT

On 10 December, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi held discussions with Jordanian King Abdullah II and Palestinian Leader Mahmoud Abbas on the latest developments of the Palestinian issue. US President Donald Trump's decision to move the US Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem was deliberated upon including repercussions of such stance. Also discussed was the means to reach a fair solution that guaranteed the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, mainly an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital.



On 11 December, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited his Egyptian counterpart Al-Sisi in Cairo. The two agreed to resume civilian flights, which Moscow had halted over two years ago pursuant to militants bombing a Russian tourist jet in Sinai in 2015. Putin's visit could be viewed as an indication of both countries' new commitment to deepen ties.

Additionally, Egyptian and Russian ministers present during Putin's visit signed a 21-billion dollar agreement to start work on Egypt's Dabaa nuclear power plant. Russia's state nuclear company Rosatom indicated that the Dabaa nuclear station was expected to be completed in 2028-2029. Al-Sisi and Putin also discussed Syria alongside a mutual rejection of US President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

On 17 December, Egypt joined a unified Arab television broadcast in support of Palestinians following announcement by Donald Trump in which he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. According to Al-Ahram Arabic, the unified broadcast was an initiative by Hussein Zein, the head of Egypt's National Media Authority, under the umbrella of the Arab League and in coordination with the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU). Egypt decried US' decision stressing that such unilateral decisions violate international resolutions.

It further added that Trump's decision would not change the legal status of Jerusalem as an occupied city, referring to a number of UN Security Council Resolutions regarding this issue, including Resolution No.242/1967, which demands that Israel withdraw from the territories it occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem.

On 24 December, Egypt indicated that it was committed to a peaceful course in terms of negotiations on the Ethiopian dam. According to Egyptian presidential spokesperson Bassam Rady, Egypt, who took a direct path in the negotiations, based on honesty, friendliness and mutual relations were still committed to that path. Meanwhile, the tripartite ministerial meeting among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan has so far failed to reach a consensus. Ethiopia has been constructing the Renaissance Dam since 2011 on the Blue Nile. Egypt on the other hand has repeatedly voiced concerns that the dam would reduce its share of Nile water, which currently stands at 55.5 billion cubic meters per year in accordance with a 1959 treaty.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

On 30 December, an Egyptian court sentenced former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi to an additional three years in prison along with 19 other defendants for “insulting the judiciary” in a televised court session. The other defendants included former members of parliament, activists and three journalists. The defendants had all been charged with making statements on TV, radio, social media or in publications deemed insulting to the judiciary. Morsi had already been sentenced to a total of 45 years in prison in two other trials after the military ousted him in 2013. Morsi's lawyer Abdel Moneim Abdel Maqsud opined that he would appeal the verdict.

### ISRAEL-PALESTINE

On 6 December, US President Donald Trump announced that US recognized “Jerusalem as the capital of Israel” and move US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump said that, “It was a belated decision. Jerusalem was not just the heart of three great religions, but it was now also one of the strongest democracies in the world. This decision is not intended to reflect a departure from our commitment to facilitate a lasting peace agreement.”



On 10 December, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave a speech in Sivas. In his speech, he opined Trump’s statement on Jerusalem as “null and void” for Turkey and the decision was not compatible with international law, conscience, justice and the realities of region.” He added that, “Jerusalem is the light of our eyes. We will not leave it to the conscience of a state that only values occupation and looting.”

On 13 December, after Trump’s statement on Jerusalem, an extraordinary summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was held in İstanbul under the leadership of Turkey. The summit hosted the leaders of Muslim-majority countries. Secretary General of OIC Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimeen said that, “We have shown a clear stance against the US decision. I congratulate all countries. We will not consent to a verdict that will prejudice Jerusalem's sanctity. We are also calling for the UN Security Council (UNSC), and we are making calls to all the countries of the world to recognize the Palestinian State as a reaction.”

On 18 December, US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was put to vote in a resolution at United Nations General Assembly. In poll, 128 countries voted in favour of the resolution, 35 countries abstained and 9 countries voted against. As a result, UNGA passed the resolution that declared US decision “null and void”. Huge majority rejected the unilateral recognition of US, which is claimed that both Israeli and Palestinians can only settle a capital as an agreed peace deal.

On 22 December, France President Emmanuel Macron met Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas in Paris. Macron indicated that, “France will remain in favour of two state solution.” A few days after voting at UN, Abbas decried US decision “risk of isolation and reliable negotiator role” After this decision, US lost its impartiality, we will no longer accept any peace plan coming from US.”

On 21 to 22 December, the third Palestinian-Israeli Peace Symposium was held in Beijing. China had held two such symposiums in Beijing and Jerusalem respectively in 2006 and 2003. The symposium came immediately after the UN General Assembly (UNGA) held poll upon Trump’s

## REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

decision. Chinese Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue Gong Xiaosheng explained that, “China held the meeting in order to play an active and constructive role in promoting the settlement of Israel-Palestine issue.” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated that “China’s stance is clear and we have always upheld our claim - that is, we support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state that enjoys full sovereignty, with East Jerusalem as its capital and based on the 1967 border.”

## REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

### LIBYA

Over 15,000 African migrants who were being held in Libyan detention camps were to be repatriated on 1 December. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicated the repatriation operation was triggered by the recent reports of rampant migrant abuse in Libya including slave auctions by criminal gangs. The IOM further indicated that it had sent over 10,000 mainly Sub-Saharan African migrants back to their home countries.



The repatriation was being carried out in collaboration with the African Union (AU).

On 2 December, the AU deployed a fact finding committee to Libya in order to ascertain the situation on the ground pertaining to human trafficking and the purported slave trade activities, according to Dr. Admore Kambudzi, Acting Director for AU Peace and Security Department.

In other developments, the UN called for elections to be held in Libya by the end of 2018. This was according to the Special Representative of UN Secretary-General and head of UN Support Mission in Libya Ghassan Salame. Salame indicated that his outfit was working with the goal of holding elections by the close of the year. Salame made this remarks in a meeting with representatives of tribes, civil society, academics and activists in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi. Elections are slated for September 30.

Subsequently on 6 December, Libya's electoral body, the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) together with UN's Special Representative in Libya, Ghassan Salame announced the start of a voter registration process for all Libyans eligible to cast ballots in the proposed upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

Meanwhile, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi was seeking to return to Libyan politics after years in detention. Gaddafi was in detention for six years as the prisoner of a militia in the town of Zintan. Gaddafi has also been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity during his alleged role in the uprising that led to the fall and death of his father.

On 17 December, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the eastern Libyan military commander whose forces control parts of the country indicated that the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) was obsolete. He added that he would listen to the will of the people; an alleged hint that he may consider running for the proposed 2018 elections.

## **REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA**

On 20 December, UN Special Representative to Libya, Ghassan Salame said he had taken notice of the broad consensus among Libyan leaders on the need to hold presidential and parliamentary elections this year. This came at the backdrop of a meeting he had with the Speaker of the House of Representatives (HoR), Ageela Saleh and a number of his deputies in Tobruk.

On 23 December, Libyan Prime Minister and head of UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) Fayez al-Sarraj urged the international community to take a firm stance against those defying the 2015 political agreement that brought about his government. The UN-backed government's mandate expired on 17 December. Serraj however, insisted the UN mandate remained in effect until a new one was introduced. Earlier, the UN Security Council indicated that the 2015 agreement “remained the only viable framework” to put an end to the country's political crisis and slammed any attempt to undermine it as “unacceptable.”

## REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

### SYRIA

On 1 December, the US-led coalition in Syria indicated that over 400 troops were set to leave Syria after allegedly helping to defeat the Islamic State in Raqqa. “We’re drawing down combat forces where it makes sense, but still continuing our efforts to help Syrian and Iraqi partners maintain security,” said Brig. Gen. Jonathan Braga, director of operations for the coalition. The Pentagon officially says there are 503 US troops in Syria. However, its quarterly report, published in November, puts the figure at 1,720. According to Reuters, US officials also opine that the number of US troops in Syria was closer to 2,000.



In other developments, the PYD dominated regions of northern Syria held the second round of a three-phase election as part of an alleged plan to set up a federal system of government. The final stage is expected to take place this January where a local assembly will be elected to act as the first regional parliament. The elections are part of an alleged Kurdish push to establish an autonomous self-administering zone within a unified and federal Syria. The PYD claim they are not seeking to secede but want autonomy within a unified state. Meanwhile, Bashar al-Jaafari, the Syrian government’s lead negotiator to Geneva dismissed the elections and rejected “any unilateral act that happens without coordination” with Damascus.

On 8 December, Russia indicated that its mission in Syria was accomplished. Moscow, thus declared victory over the Islamic State indicating that the country had been “completely liberated” from the militant group. “The Russian armed forces’ goal to defeat armed groups of the Islamic State terrorist organization in Syria has been accomplished,” senior military officer Sergei Rudskoi indicated. He added that Russia will focus on “rebuilding peace” and preserving ceasefires. Pursuant to this development, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial pullout of Russian forces in Syria indicating that conditions for the end of the nearly seven-year-long conflict had been created.

On 14 December, UN Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said that Russia must push Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its allies into accepting a UN-sponsored settlement to end the conflict. “Convince the (Syrian) government that there is no time to lose. You can think you win territory militarily but you have to win the peace,” Staffan de Mistura told Swiss television station RTS, when asked what signal Russian President Vladimir Putin could give from his “position of force.” “And to win the peace, you have to have the courage to push the government to accept that there has to be a new constitution and new elections, through the United Nations,” he said.

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On 18 December, Staffan de Mistura called peace talks in Geneva a missed opportunity after the eighth round of negotiations closed without any breakthrough. “Despite a lot of effort by my whole team, day and night with all sorts of creative formulae, we did not have real negotiations,” Staffan de Mistura told a news conference. “It was a big missed opportunity, a golden opportunity missed at the end of this year (2017).”

De Mistura said neither the opposition nor the government had sabotaged the UN-sponsored negotiations, after rival delegations accused each other of obstructing talks. He however, voiced disappointment with the government negotiators, blaming them for setting preconditions and refusing to discuss anything other than “terrorism.” De Mistura said peace talks could resume this January. However, that would depend on his ability “to come up with new ideas, parameters, about how to move the talks forward, particularly on constitution and elections”.

Irrespective of these, the UN on 20 December, indicated that it was willing to provide guidance for constitutional reforms and a timeline for elections in an attempt to revive the failed peace talks between Syria’s warring parties. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition’s delegation to Geneva said it was coming under diplomatic pressure to “freeze” its demand for Bashar al-Assad’s departure as a precondition for a settlement

Towards the end of December, the eighth round of Russian-sponsored peace talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana occurred with a central focus on Moscow’s proposed Syria national congress. Representatives from Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian government and the opposition took part in the negotiations. Speaking after the first day of meetings, chief Russian negotiator Aleksandr Lavrentyev said that “quite a lot of time” had been dedicated to discussing Moscow’s planned Syria congress, which was set to be held in the city of Sochi at an unspecified date in early 2018.

In other developments the UN Security Council (UNSCR) voted to renew the resolution, which authorized cross-border aid delivery to rebel-held parts of Syria by another year.

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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