



Global Political Trends Center  
Istanbul Kültür University

Istanbul Kültür University, Ataköy Campus,  
Bakırköy, 34156, Istanbul, Turkey  
Phone: (90) 212 498 44 76 | Fax: (90) 212 498 44 05  
[www.gpotcenter.org](http://www.gpotcenter.org)

# Regional Updates

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## REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

### CYPRUS

In the month of June, Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders agreed to return to the negotiating table in a new bid to clinch a historic deal. Following the latest talks of May 17<sup>th</sup>, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı and Greek Cypriot leader Nicolas Anastasiades met in New York for the new round of talks upon the invitation of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. After the meeting, Guterres told reporters that “all three had agreed on the need to reconvene the conference on Cyprus in June and all parties concur that security and guarantees is of vital importance for both communities”.



On 15 June, leaders of Greece, South Cyprus and Israel held 3<sup>rd</sup> Trilateral Summit in Thessaloniki to speed up plans for the development of a pipeline channelling gas to Europe from newly discovered east Mediterranean reserves. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the so-called East-Med Pipeline “would be a revolution”. He added that, “we have had preliminary studies of it, which seems promising and we are very excited about it.” Greece Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras stated that Greece wants to promote itself as a hub for the transit of gas from the eastern Mediterranean to the continent. They would also pursue a project of electricity lines linking the three mentioned countries with fiber optic cables set to boost the cost by 10 percent. Tsipras expressed his expectations for the best outcomes in talks scheduled in late June.

On 16 June, UN Special Envoy for Cyprus Espen Barth Eide announced that new round of Cyprus peace talks will begin on June 28 in Crans-Montana. Besides presence of the guarantor powers Greece, Turkey and UK, European Union will also attend as observer on behalf of Guterres. “This conference is a historical opportunity and meetings will probably last for two weeks” Guterres said.

Akıncı stated, “This island is enough for all of us. It is possible to build a peaceful future in the island if we solve this 50-year long problem. Turkish side will go to this conference with this aggregative understanding. I hope Greek side and Greece will agree on it and be able to change the destiny of the island.”

On 19 June, Turkey’s Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım met with his Greece counterpart Tsipras in Athens. Regarding the Cyprus negotiations, Tsipras stated that “a solution to the security must be found that considers all the Cypriot people and it should take place with no intervention from third powers.”

Akıncı also mentioned that the “security” issue is not the case only for Greeks, but also for Turkish side as well. He said “concerns for security is mutual and we do not want one side living under threat while the other side is secure.” He added that, the “solution needs to be fair and fair governance should be provided. We will do our best by being in dialogue with Turkey and political

## REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

parties. Especially in this period, if we wish to protect our rights and be understandable to the other side's concerns, it is possible to structure bi-communal Cyprus where people live in secure, peace and freedom.”

Prior to the conference in Switzerland, UN Special Envoy for Cyprus Eide indicated that, “this conference is a unique chance. If this opportunity is missed, it will be a sad sight.” He also stated that the main topics start with a session on “security and guarantees”.

Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades said the day before the talks, “the aim of the Conference on Cyprus is to discuss security and guarantees; it does not exclude parallel discussion on other issues. However, without progress on security, no progress is expected to happen on the other issues,” he said.

On the first day of the new round of talks among Foreign Ministers of Turkey, UK and Greece, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Boris Johnson and Nikos Kotzias, and EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini took place in the kick-off meeting for the second time in Switzerland on 28 June.

On the second day of the conference, Cavusoglu described the talks as the final one and added that, “we cannot continue negotiations forever”. Also, he denied the allegations on the removal of Turkish troops from the island post-settlement. At the end of the day, Anastasiades remarked there was no crisis but there had been some complications over the four freedoms.

Cavusoglu said that, “expectations of both Greek side and Greece are towards the removal of Turkish troops and guarantees. Without troops and guarantees, there cannot be even a start point for reconciliation. This is the final conference, no need to prolong the process anymore”, he said.

*New round of talks for settlement started in the late June and it will continue in July.*

## REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

### EGYPT

On 5 June, Egypt was one of the Arab countries to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing it of destabilizing the region through the sponsoring of militant groups. Qatar however, denies this claim.

On 22 June, the Egyptian Parliament unanimously approved President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's proposal to extend the national state of emergency for three months.



On 28 June pursuant to an agreement Egypt reached with Palestine, the Palestinian Hamas movement, which oversees Gaza, began building a “no-go security zone” along the strips of the border with Egypt. Egypt has long accused Gaza's Hamas rulers of aiding an insurgency in the northern Sinai Peninsula, allegations denied by Hamas. Egypt has imposed a blockade on Gaza since Hamas seized power in 2007. In anticipation that this buffer zone will contribute to the improvement of ties with Egypt, the deputy interior minister of Gaza, Tawfiq Abu Niem indicated that “Egypt's national security is Palestine's national security”.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL

### ISRAEL

June marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Six-Day War of 1967. The focus of the Israeli celebrations has been what it calls the “reunification” of Jerusalem, which is perceived as “Nekse” (day of losing land) by Palestinians.



Israel is set to approve nearly 2,500 new Jewish settlements units across the occupied West Bank. According to Aljazeera, the Palestinians and the majority of the international community view settlements as unlawful and a major obstacle to a two-state solution. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remarked that “whether a political solution was provided or not, Israel would continue its security control across the West Bank.” He also added that, “Palestinians should recognize Israel as a state of Jews. This is the basis for peace and refusal of it is an obstacle to peace”.

On 3 June, Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the UN, criticised UN due to its stance against Israel and for its unfair treatment of Israel. “The council must end its practice of wrongly singling out Israel for criticism” Haley indicated.

The Israeli security cabinet has approved a 40-percent reduction in Israel’s electricity supply to the Gaza Strip. The daily amount of necessary electricity power usage is between 450 and 500 megawatts, which Gaza receives less than half of that. In fact, Gaza’s 2 million residents get only four hours of power daily.

On 21 June, Jared Kushner, US President Trump’s senior adviser and son-in-law, held separate meetings with Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas with the aim of reviving US efforts to resume the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. Netanyahu warmly greeted Kushner and said that “this was an opportunity to pursue our common goals of security, prosperity and peace.” The US President has tasked Kushner with the ambitious goal of “ultimate deal”, but deep divisions remain as this is one of the longest Middle East crises. A White House statement said all parties during the meeting had acknowledged “the need for economic opportunities for Palestinians and major investments in the Palestinian economy.” Nabil Abu Rudeinah, Abbas's spokesperson, said that all issues were discussed in-depth including final status issues such as refugees and prisoners and that Abbas affirmed during the meeting his support for a two-state solution.

On June 22, a completely new Israeli construction started on West Bank settlement called Amichai, meaning “my nation lives”, for the first time in more than two decades. It is for the residents of Amona, who were forced to leave in February. US President Trump said that settlement expansion “may not be helpful” in achieving peace.

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On June 25, Netanyahu backtracked on a decision, adopted 17 months ago, to allow an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall in Jerusalem where men and women can worship together and non-Orthodox rituals can be practiced.

“Today’s cancellation of the decision is a severe blow to the unity of the Jewish people, the Jewish communities and the fabric of the relationship between the state of Israel and the Jews in the Diaspora,” said Avigdor Lieberman, who is Defence Minister of Israel.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

### LIBYA

On 1 June, forces loyal to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya took control of Tripoli International Airport. The airport was badly damaged in 2014 pursuant to the withdrawal of rival militias from the site. However, the leader of the new Presidential Guard (forces loyal to the GNA) General Najmi Al-Nakoula indicated that the capture of the airport signified the beginning of the reconstruction of state institutions and the return to rule of law.



On 2 June, the Bunyan al-Marsous Forces who support the UN-backed GNA indicated that they were simultaneously attacked by forces loyal to Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar and fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in the central district of Jufra, south of Sirte. Subsequently on 3 June, forces of Haftar said they had taken control of the strategic military base of Jufra.

On 7 June, the head of UN Support Mission in Libya Martin Kobler updated the 15-member UN Security Council on priority issues in Libya. He said despite the situation on the ground in Libya, there is a strong desire for a secure and peaceful future in the country. He noted that there have been positive developments due to the Libyan Political Agreement. Irrespective of such developments, he stressed that efforts should be geared towards national reconciliation, the larger economic situation as well as the security situation in Libya.

On 11 June, the Abu Bakr al-Sadiq Brigade in Zintan said it had released Saif al-Islam, son of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi after over five years in captivity. According to the Zintan-based militia, he was released due to an amnesty law passed in 2016 by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives.

It is however, unclear whether Al-Islam's freedom in Libya is only partial. For instance, whilst the eastern-based parliament in Tobruk to which the Zintan based militia pledges allegiance opines he is free, Tripoli's UN-backed Government of National Accord deems him a war criminal. The UN-backed government's view is based on a court ruling in 2015 that sentenced Al-Islam to death in absentia for crimes committed during Libya's revolution.

On hearing news of his release, International Criminal Court's prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said that Saif al-Islam must be returned into custody and surrendered to the ICC by Libyan authorities immediately. An arrest warrant was issued by the ICC in 2011 for crimes against humanity, hence Libya is obliged to arrest and hand him over to the ICC irrespective of any "purported" amnesty law in Libya, Bensouda added.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

### SYRIA

On 5 June, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters captured a hydroelectric facility from the Islamic State. The forces who are also linked to the PYD and PKK have now secured all three major dams along the Euphrates river according to Reuters.



In addition to this, the Islamic State has been pushed out of Maskaneh, which lays on the western banks of the Euphrates River in Aleppo province by pro-government forces, according to the UK-based monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The latest push has reduced the presence of Islamic State militants to desert areas in the southeast corner of the province.

On 13 June, SDF said it had captured a district on the western outskirts of Raqqa city. In their statement, the forces indicated they had taken control of the al-Romaniya neighborhood in the western outskirts of Islamic State stronghold as part of an offensive launched to push the Islamic State militants out of the city. Al-Romaniya is the third district to fall under SDF control after the group captured the al-Mishlab district east of Raqqa and most of the al-Sabahia district.

The Russian military said on 16 June that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State may have been killed in an airstrike in May that targeted the Islamic State meeting held on the southern outskirts of Raqqa.

On 22 June, French president Emmanuel Macron indicated that he did not envisage any “legitimate successor” to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. “The new perspective that I have had on this subject is that I have not stated that Bashar al-Assad’s departure is a precondition for everything because nobody has shown me a legitimate successor”, said Macron. He further added that he does not consider Assad’s removal to be a priority in solving the Syrian conflict and emphasize the importance of cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

On the eve of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the Syrian government released 672 detainees including 91 women. Syria’s Justice Minister Hisham al-Shaar said the release was in a bid to “sustain national reconciliation efforts and the homeland’s unity”. He added that of those released, 588 were freed in the Damascus.

On 30 June, an investigation led by the organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons concluded that sarin or a sarin-like substance was employed in the chemical weapons attack on Idlib last April. “Now that we know the undeniable truth, we look forward to an independent

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investigation to confirm exactly who was responsible for these brutal attacks so we can find justice for the victims”, said Nikki Haley, US envoy to the United Nations.

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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## **CONTACT DETAILS**

### **Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center**

Istanbul Kültür University  
Atakoy Campus, Bakirkoy  
34 156 Istanbul, Turkey

[www.gpotcenter.org](http://www.gpotcenter.org)  
[info@gpotcenter.org](mailto:info@gpotcenter.org)  
Tel: +90 212 498 44 76/65  
Fax: +90 212 498 44 05

