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Regional Updates

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REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

CYPRUS

On 2 May, Turkish Cypriot Leader Akıncı and Greek Cypriot Leader Anastasiades met in the buffer zone. Akıncı stressed upcoming weeks would be vital on Cyprus negotiations and suggested that both parties should not come up with different scenarios during this process. In his statement, he criticized UN for not contributing much and added “we are walking back and front around the same existing problems”. Also, he accused Greek side due to their unilateral pursuit of hydrocarbon-related activities in Eastern Mediterranean. “These could create only new kind of tensions in the region. Yet, prospective energy sources should be the reason of rather cooperation than division”, Akıncı added.



Moreover, Akıncı stated that “we all know that rotating presidency will one way or other occur but Greek side is still persistent not to accept this fact.” He said both sides came to a mutual agreement on the issue of legal residence but indicated his side expects to see more analytical initiatives about political equality from the Greek side.

On 5 May, Akıncı addressed a speech at Istanbul University over Cyprus Talks. After he elaborated historical background of Cyprus issue, he said “although either unitary or confederation is easier to structure than federal system, we endeavor for federalism that both parties and their citizens will benefit most.” He added “Greek authority needs to change its mentality in order to reach a compromise in division of powers.”

Additionally, Akıncı claimed that negative impacts of the 2018 Greek Cypriot Presidency elections have already started to be seen earlier than expected and this damage peace talks. “If this negotiation process is not successful due to reasons not originating from Turkish Cypriot side, we as Turkish Cypriots will continue our way as a secular and democratic society with our identity as TRNC. Turkey does not need a new province as we do not want to be a province”, he added.

On 9 May, former Turkish Cypriot Leader Dervis Eroglu gave a speech at Akdeniz University over Cyprus. He said he does not believe in a way of solution under these circumstances in Cyprus. Eroglu stated Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha vessel started seismic exploration on behalf of the agreement with Turkey under Turkish Petroleum Corporation. “When drilling begins, our seismic exploration will take place by renting or buying the platform. That's when the negotiation table will be lifted”, Eroglu claimed.

On 10 May, Akıncı and Anastasiades met both Head of the Structural Reform Support Service in the European Commission Maarten Verwey and a Representative to the UN Good Offices Mission in Cyprus Peter Van Nuffel. At the end of the meeting, Akıncı reported that Turkish Cypriot side wants a solution as well as being a part of the European Union.

REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

On 17 May, both leaders held last face-to-face scheduled meeting in the current stage of the Cyprus talks, which has been continuing for the past two years. In the meeting, the Turkish Cypriot side suggested a new Geneva-style international conference on Cyprus, but the Greek Cypriot side rejected it. Anastasiades proposed the preliminary condition “territory” issue before going to the 2nd Geneva Conference.

At the end of the month, Espen Barth Eide, Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Cyprus, informed Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that, “unfortunately, despite serious efforts to overcome their differences regarding the modalities for meeting in Geneva, the leaders were unable to find common ground.”

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

EGYPT

On 7 May, several people were allowed to enter the Gaza strip from Egypt as part of a three-day opening of the Rafah crossing. The director of public relations at the Hamas-run Ministry of Interior, Ali Nabulsiya indicated that the crossing would remain open only for arrivals to Gaza from Egypt. Egyptian authorities said that their decision to open the crossing came upon the request by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to Egyptian Prime Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Egypt has upheld an Israeli military blockade on the Gaza Strip since the ousting of former president Muhammad Morsi in 2013.



On 8 May, the Giza Criminal Court in Egypt sentenced Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide, Mohammed Badie and two of its members to life imprisonment for "planning violent attacks". The other two were Mahmoud Ghozlan, Brotherhood spokesperson and Hossam Abubakr, a member of the Brotherhood's guidance bureau. They were sentenced in connection to the "Rabaa operations room case". According to defense lawyer, Abdel Moneim Abdel Maksoud, they were accused of conspiring to stir unrest during protests that followed the July 2013 military-led overthrow of Egypt's former president Mohamed Morsi who hailed from The Brotherhood.

On 24 May, gunmen attacked buses that were carrying Egyptian Coptic Christians to a monastery killing at least 28 people and wounding over 30 people in South Cairo. Subsequently, on 26 May, Egyptian fighter jets carried out airstrikes against camps near Derna in Libya where militants responsible for the attack were believed to have been trained.

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

LIBYA

On 2 May, German foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel indicated that the deal between Italy and Libya to hold migrants in the latter “ignores catastrophic conditions” and will not necessarily lead to a curb in migration. His stance contradicts Berlin’s earlier support for the deal. Italy signed the deal with the U.N-backed Government of National Accord. The deal also promised training, equipment and money to fight human traffickers; an agreement initially supported by both the European Union and Germany.



In other developments, the head of Libya’s UN-backed government Fayez al-Serraj met with eastern Libya army commander General Khalifa Haftar in the United Arab Emirates. The two men held face-to-face talks in Abu Dhabi as a result of International and Arab mediation. There was however, no official statement after the meeting. It was the second time the two had met since Serraj was named prime minister as a result of the UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in 2015. The two have allegedly agreed in principle to hold elections in 2018 and to a power-sharing deal.

On 6 May, UN envoy to Libya Martin Kobler said he had a “constructive meeting” with House of Representatives (HoR) leader Ageelah Saleh in the latter’s hometown of Guba. It was the fourth meeting between the two since Kobler was ignored by Saleh in January.

On 20 May, 141 people were killed in an attack by Third Force Brigade from the western city of Misrata. The attack occurred at Brak Al-Shati southern air base of Libya. Pursuant to the attack Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj suspended his defense minister pending an investigation into the incident. The attack destroyed the truce in the area between eastern and western Libya based military alliances. According to Ahmed al-Mismari, spokesperson for the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), 103 of those killed in the attack were LNA troops. The attack risks escalation of conflict between eastern-based factions and rivals loosely aligned with current and former governments in Tripoli.

On 21 May, the head of UN Refugee Agency, Filippo Grandi urged Libyan authorities to free all asylum seekers and refugees in its detention centers. He said this after he visited one of the detention centers in Tripoli. “I was shocked at the harsh conditions in which refugees and migrants were held”, Grandi said. “Children, women and men who have suffered so much already should not have to endure such hardship”, he added.

Meanwhile, Fatou Bensouda, International Criminal Court prosecutor has expressed concern at the inhumane detention of thousands of vulnerable refugees and migrants in Libya. She said she was examining whether an investigation could be opened into crimes against them.

REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

SYRIA

On 3 May, Syrian rebel groups announced that they would temporarily withdraw from the Astana peace talks. The plans for “safe zones” were scheduled to be at the forefront of discussions in the fourth round of the talks; however, rebel groups suspended their participation from the talks in protest over the continued use of airstrikes in Syria. Should the latest plans hold, Russia, Iran and Turkey could act as guarantors to Russia’s plan for a series of “de-escalation zones” in rebel-held areas across Syria.



On 4 May, Russia proposed the introduction of foreign troops to act as a buffer between warring factions in Syria as part of its plan to introduce “de-escalation” zones and suspend hostilities in Syria. The “buffers” will be installed between territories controlled by rebels which are not affiliated to the Islamic State and government forces in the country. Turkey, Iran and Russia subsequently signed an agreement ratifying the safe zone proposal despite protests from some Syrian rebel groups over Iran’s involvement.

Irrespective of the ratification, the Syrian government rejected the proposal to introduce foreign troops or UN forces as part of efforts to monitor “de-escalation” zones. Syrian foreign minister Walid Moallem insisted that the Assad regime would not accept international forces acting as “buffer” between rebel fighters and government troops. “We do not accept a role for the United Nations or international forces to monitor the agreement”, said Moallem. He added that, “the Syrian army will be prepared to respond in a decisive manner” should there be violations of this decree. The US on the other hand said they would assess the proposal. “We will look at the proposal and see if it can work”, said US defense secretary Jim Mattis.

On 16 May, the sixth round of Geneva Peace Talks began. UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said that these talks will complement the ones in Astana and would focus on the “four baskets” namely transitional government, the drafting of a constitution, the establishment of parliamentary elections and continued coordination on the fight against terrorism. President Bashar al-Assad however, indicated subsequently that the Geneva Talks were “merely a meeting for the media” with Astana the place where real progress was being made. There was an 18-person delegation led by the Syrian ambassador to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari representing the Syrian regime in the talks. The Syrian opposition is represented in Geneva by the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) headed by Nasr al-Hariri.

REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

The sixth round of peace talks however, stalled when the Free Syrian Army walked out of the talks complaining about a lack of clarity from De Mistura over the role of his office during potential transition of power in the country. Pursuant to this, De Mistura put his proposal for a Syrian constitution on hold in order to prevent further withdrawals and walkouts.

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

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