



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

Regional Updates

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Regional Updates: Contents

Cyprus.....4

Egypt.....6

Libya.....8

Syria.....9

CYPRUS

After 21-month solid progress, the peace talks broke down over a bill making the commemoration of a 1950 referendum in support of union with Greece mandatory in Greek Cypriot schools. However, with the repeal of the decision by Greek Cypriot Parliament, both Greek and Turkish leaders have agreed to resume peace talks in April.



On 2 April, Greek Cypriot Leader Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot Leader Akıncı had a four-hour dinner hosted by Espan Barth Eide at Ledra Palace Hotel in Nicosia. Before the meeting, Akıncı mentioned the 2018 March elections in the Greek side as a critical period. For him, talks and discussions over Cyprus should reach an outcome till then; otherwise the solution process will be prolonged. He indicated his concerns for future generations, if this current status quo is to prevail. On the other hand, Anastasiades believes reaching a settlement depends on the genuine will of each side. “Therefore, there is neither timetable nor an upgraded role for the United Nations”, he said. At the end of the meeting, both leaders stated their will to continue the talks after a two-month interruption.

On 3 April, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Israel aimed to end the pipeline project by 2025, which envisaged Mediterranean natural gas from Israel to Europe. The pipeline is aimed at linking natural gas fields off Israel and Cyprus Island to Europe via Greece and possibly Italy. In the following day, energy ministers of aforesaid four countries signed a “Joint Declaration” in Tel Aviv. Cyprus Energy Minister Geogrios Lakkatrypis indicated that Cyprus, as natural gas producer and conveyer, will continue to support gas exporting such as EastMed pipeline.

Following that, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a written statement regarding natural resources in the island and indicates this should be in the framework of a bilateral agreement approved by both Turkish and Greek sides.

On 6 April, UK Foreign Affairs Minister Boris Johnson spoke during his visit to Athens, and stated that “Both Turkish and Greek sides endeavour for unification, United Kingdom will promote those efforts till a unified Cyprus is achieved”.

On 11 April, Akıncı and Anastasiades met for the first time in the buffer zone to restart the peace talks after a two-month halt. Both leaders stated they are ready to hear more suggestions by the UN to reach a compromise on “Security and Guarantees” in Cyprus. The two leaders expect the summer to be a make-or-break period for the talks. “I hope this new round of negotiations can finally bring

REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

us to the point where we could say that there is agreement” Anastasiades told reporters after the meeting.

On 20 April, Akıncı said that “for a federal solution there are three crucial factors: freedom, equality and safety. Cypriot Turks are not minority in the island but equivalent partner. We have been discussing the problems in Cyprus since 1968, but we will not discuss it a 50-year more. I strongly believe there will be peace in the future in Cyprus. All we should do is respect rights of the others.” Both Akıncı and Anastasiades agreed the next two-month period are quite critical for negotiations.

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

EGYPT

At the beginning of April, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited Washington. In his meeting with US President Donald Trump, both sides renewed relationships after alleged tensions over Sisi's crackdown on opponents. Trump indicated he "wanted to use Sisi's visit to reboot bilateral relationship and build on the strong connection between the two countries". Whilst Egypt had long been a close United States' ally in the Middle East, the bilateral relationship between the two countries was "strained" when former President Barack Obama criticized Sisi for cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's oldest Islamic group in 2013.



On 2 April, the Egyptian Court of Urgent Matters ruled that a judicial decision to block the transfer of two Red Sea Islands, Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia was null and void. Earlier in January, an Egyptian court had rejected the government's plan to transfer the two islands to Saudi Arabia. The decision to hand over the islands to Saudi Arabia had also triggered protests by sections of Egyptian public who maintain the islands belong to Egypt. The decision on the island is however, subject to appeal and any final verdict must be approved by parliament.

On 6 April, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in an interview with Fox News opined that he does not believe UN peacekeeping troops should be deployed in Libya. What he rather welcomed was the support of a national army in Libya. He also added that, the embargo on the Libyan army should be lifted in order to assist them in performing their mission to ensure stability.

On 9 April, suicide bombers struck two Coptic churches in northern Egypt killing at least 44 people during a Palm Sunday service. Subsequently, a three-month nation-wide state of emergency was declared by President Al-Sisi. Both attacks were claimed by the Islamic State terrorist network. Responding to the state of emergency declaration, Amnesty International opined that, there will be further deterioration in human rights in Egypt unless the root causes of sectarianism in Egypt are addressed.

On 23 April, Egyptian and United States' navies began a joint exercise, "Eagle Salute 2017" in the regional waters of the Red Sea according to Egypt's Military. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan and Italy were participating in the exercise as monitors. The objective of this naval exercise was to enhance military capabilities and exchange experiences on the use of latest fighting technologies. Activities in the exercise included search-and-rescue training, planning and organizing joint combat operations as well as practicing inspection and raiding of suspect ships.

REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

At the end of April, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi met with the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas. They discussed ways of reviving the peace process between Israel in order to reach a two-state solution, according to a statement released by the Office of the Egyptian Presidency. The statement further stated that “Egypt supports Palestinians in establishing their independent state within the borders of June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

LIBYA

On 1 April, European lawmakers extended sanctions for six more months since its inception in April 2016 against Ageelah Saleh, Nuri Abu Sahmain and Khalifa Al-Ghweil. Saleh is the Speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives; Sahmain is the Head of the General National Congress and Al-Ghweil is the Prime Minister of the Salvation Government. According to European lawmakers, these three are obstructing the efforts to form a democratic government through violations of the UN-backed 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA).



On 2 April, representatives of tribes living in the south of Libya signed a peace agreement after over three days in secret negotiations in the Italian Ministry of Interior. According to the *Italian La Stampa*, Toubou and Awlad Sulaiman ethnic groups with over 60 clan leaders signed a peace treaty as a result of secret 72-hour talks headed by Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti. This treaty includes the head of the largest Tuareg tribe in Fezzan as well as Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Omar of Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). The treaty is anticipated to bolster efforts toward sustainable peace in Libya.

In other developments, a former top Muammar Gaddafi official has been appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Ageelah Salah as his adviser for Maghreb affairs. Mohamed Belgasse Zway was the last Secretary-General of the General People's Congress from 2010 till the revolution that overthrew the Gaddafi regime. He was arrested for his involvement with the Gaddafi regime however, in 2013 a court found him not guilty. He was subsequently tried again and sentenced to a 12 year prison term but was later freed on health grounds.

On 7 April, a new group named the Supreme Council for Oil, Gas and Water Resources threatened to block the flow of oil from fields in eastern Libya to oil export terminals. They complained that all oil revenues go to the central bank in Tripoli. The group has pledged allegiance to the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR). The HoR does not recognize the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).

On 8 April, French Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve in a meeting with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj in Tunis underlined France's stance on the control of Libyan oil. He indicated that

REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

the National Oil Corporation (NOC) must align itself with the UN-backed Presidency Council. This gesture is an indication of support to the “weakened” UN-backed Presidency Council also known as the Government of National Accord (GNA).

On 11 April, the Commander of the Eastern Forces of Operation Dignity under the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) Khalifa Haftar issued a travel ban. The ban restrains the nationals of six Muslim countries from entering the eastern districts and cities that Haftar’s forces control in Libya. The travel ban affects nationals of Iran, Syria, Sudan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Yemen.

On 12 April, Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj in an interview reported by the *Agence France-Press* said the European Union has reneged on pledges to assist Libya fight migrant smuggling to Europe. “Unfortunately Europe did not help us but made just empty promises”, said Al-Serraj. Meanwhile, Federica Mogherini, EU Foreign Policy Chief has indicated that the European External Action Service is studying an aid request from Serraj’s government.

On 24 April, the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed an arrest warrant for former head of Libya’s Internal Security Agency. According to the ICC warrant, Mohamed Khaled Al-Tuhamy is suspected of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in repressing opposition to former Libyan Leader Muammar Gaddafi. The warrant was unsealed after a request by ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda.

REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

SYRIA

At the beginning of April, European Union foreign ministers indicated that they do not see a future role for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in post-conflict Syria. Commenting on the issue, the EU bloc Foreign Affairs Chief Federica Mogherini said, “it seems completely unrealistic to believe that the future of Syria will be exactly the same as it used to be in the past”. She further added that the EU would support any solution that will be acceptable by all Syrians.



In other developments, 50,000 Syrian refugees returned to parts of Syria controlled by Turkish troops according to, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. Nearly 3 million Syrian refugees are registered in Turkey according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

On 4 April, 72 people were killed in a suspected gas attack on Idlib. Allegedly, Syrian government warplanes targeted the town of Khan Shaykhoun in the rebel-held province. The Syrian government subsequently denied claims it used the chemicals against its own citizens. On the other hand, the United States fired 59 cruise missiles on the Shayrat airfield in the Homs province where the supposed chemical attack was said to have originated. Responding to the US strikes on the airfield, Russian Presidency office said, the strikes were an “aggression against a sovereign nation” on a “made-up pretext”.

Meanwhile, commenting on the US Strikes, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, “President Trump sent a strong and clear message that the use and spread of chemical weapons will not be tolerated”.

In a final response to the US strikes, the Syria-based operations room of its key Assad allies, Russia and Iran said, the US strikes overstepped “red line”. Pursuant to their stance that US had overstepped “red line”, they indicated they will react firmly to any aggression against Syria and to any infringement against “red lines” against whoever carries them out.

In other developments, on 13 April, Russia used its veto to block a UN Security Council draft resolution by the US, France and the UK that condemned the suspected gas attack by the Syrian government on Idlib.

Aside these, a joint inquiry by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, have accused the Syrian government of using toxic gas as a weapon three times in 2014 and 2015.

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
info@gpotcenter.org
Tel: +90 212 498 44 76/65
Fax: +90 212 498 44 05

