



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

February 2016 | № 12



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## CYPRUS

1. Greek Cypriot Defense Minister Christoforos Fokaides paid the first official visit to Egypt on February 29, where he signed a bilateral military cooperation program with his Egyptian counterpart Sedki Sobhi.

2. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu avowed that in order to secure a permanent Cyprus settlement, the security concerns of Turkish and Greek Cypriots would have to be taken into account. Çavuşoğlu said that for



Turkish Cypriots, Ankara's role would be critical, however, he did not talk on the exact sort of formulas on guarantees. Furthermore Çavuşoğlu mentioned that Ankara would support anything the two sides agree on, and he hinted that Ankara would financially contribute to the settlement of the Cyprus problem.

3. On February 12, UN Special Adviser Espen Barth Eide said that the issue of property was 90 percent solved, but warned that the greatest difficulties could be faced in settling the remaining part. He added that the solution for the Cyprus question could be reached this year, and that there is a significant support from the international community for a solution. "I think I'm the last special adviser, and I hope it's for good reasons," Eide said.

4. On February 26, UN Special Adviser Espen Barth Eide said there are few but quite important political issues that need to be address during the reunification talks. Eide expressed his concerns ahead of a meeting between the leaders of the two communities on February 26. According to Eide, Cyprus needs to be an "economically viable federation, a real federation with a clear authority at the federal level and that there is full understanding of what would be the relationship between the federal level and the constituent state level."

5. Cypriot Greek Archbishop Chrysostomos noted that the reunification talks are going through a difficult phase. On February 21 Chrysostomos explained that the Cyprus settlement would be hard to reach if Turkey does not take into consideration interests of both sides.

6. Following the meeting with the religious leaders, UN Special Adviser Espen Barth Eide said that the religious leaders were working closely to support reunification. Archbishop Chrysostomos, Turkish Cypriot Mufti Dr. Talip Atalay, Maronite Archbishop Youssef Soueif, the Latin Representative Father George Kraj and the representative of the Armenian Archbishop Nareg attended the meeting hosted by the Swedish Ambassador in Nicosia, Klas Gierow.

7. Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades stated that the reunification talks' success to a great degree depends on the stance adopted by Turkey. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal published on February 2, Anastasiades said there are aspects that give Turkey incentives to contribute to the resolution. According to him the discovery of gas fields in the southeast

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Mediterranean directly affects Turkish interests, additionally the resolution of the Cyprus dispute could foster Turkish accession to EU. Anastasiades thinks that the “current timing is the most favorable that could allow us to finally agree to put an end to the unacceptable current situation.”

8. In an interview with a local newspaper Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades said that Turkey could contribute to Cyprus settlement through its engagement in the reunification talks.
9. On February 4 the chief negotiators of the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot sides, Andreas Mavroyiannis and Özdil Nami briefly met with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The chief negotiators discussed with President Juncker’s personal representatives the state of play in the Cyprus settlement talks.
10. Turkish Cypriot leaders Mustafa Akıncı and Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades pointed out a joint plea for information regarding missing persons. Furthermore, the same appeal was made by Cyprus’ religious leaders on February 9.

## EGYPT

### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi expressed condolences to the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi for the death of PhD student Giulio Regeni who was brutally murdered in Egypt. A joint Italy-Egypt investigation was confirmed by the authorities.
2. In a speech inaugurating a series of development projects, el-Sisi discussed future challenges which include the rising cost of water, insufficient housing, and independence of the judiciary.
3. Italy demanded the Egyptian government's transparent cooperation in an investigation into the brutal murder of Cambridge PhD candidate Giulio Regeni.
4. Calling for the nationwide protests on February 20, the Doctors Syndicate requested the termination of the Health Minister for failing to appropriately respond to the physical assaults faced by doctors.
5. For the first time in 2016, El-Sisi ordered the opening of the Rafah border crossing for three days.
6. In support of the final steps of Egypt's proposed roadmap, el-Sisi announced the transfer of legislative powers to the newly-elected House of Representatives.
7. The el-Nadeem Centre, which documented alleged torture cases since 1993, was ordered to be shut down by the government due to the breach of Health Ministry regulations.
8. Following several alleged cases of police abuse, el-Sisi promised legal amendments to counter "irresponsible acts" of police officers. Subsequently, MPs asked to discuss the matter in parliament.
9. Writer Ahmed Nagy was sentenced to two years in prison for authoring an article with "sexually explicit text".
10. Police personnel protested outside the Sharqiya Security Directorate following the arrest of seven of their colleagues, who previously voiced their concerns for pay raises.
11. In a conference of the 2030 vision, on February 24, President el-Sisi delivered a speech highlighting the main challenges facing Egypt: preserving the Egyptian state; securing economic and social development; bolstering anti-corruption measures; improving the quality of life; rebuilding infrastructure; and respecting human rights law. In international affairs, he indicated that the Russian airliner was indeed downed by terrorism and that Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam will not affect Egypt's availability of water.



### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

1. Feb. 2 - As Egypt's General Authority for Supply Commodities rejected a 63,000 ton wheat shipment due to 0.05 percent of ergot, the country—which is the world's largest importer of wheat—may face a wheat supply crisis.
2. During a visit to 6th of October City, el-Sisi launched 34 development projects—worth 16 LE

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- billion—to be implemented across the country by the Armed Forces and other ministries.
3. During the African Economic Summit, el-Sisi called for investment and joint action; and agreed on strengthening trilateral relations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Similarly, Prime Minister Sherif Ismail announced a \$500 million financing deal with the African Development Bank.
  4. Compared to 2015, fuel subsidies this year witnessed a 42% drop from \$5.7 billion to \$3.3 billion.
  5. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Egypt on January 19 and signed 21 aid deals and investments worth billions of dollars in the fields of infrastructure, transportation, electricity, housing, and agriculture.
  6. The 10th meeting of the Egyptian-Russian joint committee for trade, economic, scientific, and technical cooperation took place on January 31st to bolster cooperation in several fields.

## INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. The Egyptian Embassy in Berlin denied allegations that it is sending Cairo reports on Egyptian political activists in Germany.
2. Chairman of Cairo International Airport Company Mohamed Mahrous said during a press conference that the Russian, German, British, Kazakhstani, and Canadian authorities inspected the security measures of Cairo's international airport. In addition the Civil Aviation Ministry signed an agreement to improve airport security.
3. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz confirmed that security cooperation between Egypt and Israel is stronger than ever.
4. Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia are expected to discuss technical offers on impact studies of Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam.
5. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan affirmed ministerial-level talks between Turkey and Egypt, while ruling out a meeting with President el-Sisi until death sentences for Muslim Brotherhood leaders are annulled.
6. In a visit to Washington D.C., Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss security challenges and cooperation. He also met with research centers, the press, prominent former officials, and Jewish-American organizations to discuss the most recent developments in the Middle Eastern region. Shoukry's meetings were followed by el-Sisi's meeting with leaders of Jewish-American organizations in Cairo.
7. Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan discussed the proposals of the studies on the effect of the Ethiopian Renaissance.
8. Egypt took part in a Saudi-coordinated military exercise called "Thunder of the North" in Hafr al-Baten. It was attended by troops from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Sudan.
9. El-Sisi expressed support for the U.N.-backed political process to form a national unity government in Libya.
10. As part of the reforms of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group announced its decision to formally cut ties with its parent branch in Egypt.
11. During a conference, British Ambassador to Egypt John Casson highlighted the importance of supporting Egypt's economic sector and counter terrorism efforts.
12. Egypt attended the 2016 G20 Summit in Hanzhou Zhejiang as a Guest of Honor.

## ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Both Israeli PM Netanyahu and Foreign Ministry Head Dore Gold unveiled Israel's talks with 'moderate' Sunni Arab states. Gold stated that Israel has maintained contact with almost all Arab states, while Netanyahu told EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, that Israel would appreciate the same understanding evinced by Sunni Arab states from the EU too.



In a different instance, Mogherini said that PM Netanyahu and President Abbas have agreed to cooperate with the process of compiling an EU report on the freeze in the peace process, which was agreed on by the Foreign Ministers of the Quartet. Sources in Netanyahu's office denied that he has agreed to cooperate with the compiling of the report.

In Israel, the Labor Party unanimously approved opposition leader Isaac Herzog's plan to separate from the Palestinians, and he has been attacked by the Israeli left including his own party members for saying that the two-state solution is impossible under current conditions. The so-called plan calls for taking steps to advance a two-state solution even if final status negotiations cannot be held now.

Three Arab lawmakers were suspended from the Knesset following a public uproar over their meeting with families of slain terrorists.

In a leaked recording that was also published by a-Shark al-Awsat newspaper, a senior Hamas official criticized Iran for not helping the group since 2009 saying, "all their claims about assistance are lies". Iranian officials have rejected the reports and stressed that supporting the fight against Israel remains a "principled policy".

During a press conference in Berlin, PM Netanyahu described the French initiative that calls for an international peace conference, and—if that fails—recognition of a Palestinian state by France as "strange". On the other side, Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was alongside Netanyahu, commented on Germany's relations with Iran when she was asked about Germany's rush to rebuild ties with Tehran. She answered: "We made very clear—the federal government, all parties that make up the coalition—that there cannot exist normal, friendly relations with Iran as long as Iran doesn't recognize Israel's right to exist."

## SYRIA

1. The Geneva talks opened on February 2, hours after President Bashar al-Assad approved “in principle” to the opposition bloc’s humanitarian demands. The talks are scheduled to last six months.
2. In response to the Russian-backed advancement of the Syrian army in northern Aleppo, the Syria talks were suspended until February 25 by U.N. Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, who called for immediate help from the U.S. and Russia to end the assault. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon highlighted that the airstrikes undermined the peace process and the High Negotiations Committee said it will not return to the peace talks unless its humanitarian demands are met.
3. Over 70 world leaders gathered in London for a donor conference which raised over \$10 billion in pledges to help those affected by the war in Syria with funds for healthcare, shelter, education and jobs.
4. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have indicated the possibility of deploying special forces and ground troops to Syria to fight ISIS. The claim was mocked by Iranian Major General Ali Jafari. Additionally, Saudi officials plan to run a military exercise in March involving 150,000 troops from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Morocco, Turkey, Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar.
5. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that 40,000 people have been forcibly displaced by the fighting around Aleppo, which is populated by over 300,000 people. The local Turkish governor said that nearly 35,000 had arrived at the Turkish border.
6. As the Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah-backed assault intensified around the northern city of Aleppo, the U.N. warned that a new wave of refugees could flee the city. Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that 10,000 of 50,000 Syrian refugees have been admitted entry and the process is continuing in a controlled fashion.
7. In response to pressure demanding the halt of support for the Syrian government’s assault around Aleppo, Russia proposed a March 1 ceasefire.
8. On February 11, 17 nations comprising the International Syria Support Group reached an agreement in Munich on the cessation of hostilities within a week’s time to pave the way for humanitarian aid and resumption of the Geneva talks.
9. Two rebel commanders have confirmed receiving ample supplies of ground-to-ground missiles to counter the Russian-backed assault around Aleppo.
10. The Turkish military began shelling positions of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party-backed (PYD) militia—People’s Protection Units (YPG)—on February 12 as they launched a major Russian-supported operation to seize the strategic town of Azaz.
11. Voicing doubt over the success of the agreed upon ceasefire plan, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon and Director-General of Israel’s Intelligence Ministry, both advocated the partitioning of Syria as the “only possible solution”.



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12. As the assault around Aleppo intensified, several hospitals and schools were reportedly bombed. In the meantime, U.N. Envoy Staffan de Mistura to Syria visited Damascus in attempt to solidify efforts for a ceasefire.
13. Claiming that the war would be impossible to stop without a ground operation, Turkey called on its allies for a ground operation in Syria.
14. On February 17, as per the agreement negotiated in Munich, the Syrian government allowed U.N.-coordinated convoys to deliver urgently-needed humanitarian aid to seven besieged areas in Syria.
15. Russian Envoy to the U.N. Vitaly Churkin expressed the country's deep political, diplomatic, and military support to Syria and noted that al-Assad too should take that into account. Churkin's comments came in response to al-Assad's announced intent to continue fighting until all lost land would be regained.
16. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC) announced the agreement of several opposition groups, including al-Nusra Front, to a potential two- to three-week ceasefire on conditions of halting Russian airstrikes, lifting the sieges, and allowing humanitarian aid to areas where it is needed.
17. On February 21, after talks between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the former announced the U.S. and Russia reached a provisional agreement for a ceasefire in Syria. Similarly, al-Assad indicated he was ready for the ceasefire with the condition that it would not be used to improve the rebels' logistical support and military position.
18. A ceasefire agreement brokered by the U.S. and Russia was drafted and set to come in force by the 27th of February. The agreement, which excludes al-Nusra Front and ISIS, came after deadly ISIS bombings in Damascus and Homs, killing 150 and wounding more than 200.
19. Throughout the final week of February, several developments occurred with regards to the U.S.-Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement: al-Assad confirmed that his government was ready to implement the agreement; Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the modalities of the ceasefire via telephone with Saudi King Salman al-Saud and Iranian leaders; Turkey voiced skepticism over the possible consequences and vowed to continue shelling YPG positions; the YPG militia said it would also comply by the agreement but would respond if attacked; Kerry suggested that Syria could be partitioned in the event of the collapse of the peace talks; and U.S. President Barack Obama expressed caution "about raising expectations" on the agreement.
20. Before the official start of the cessation of hostilities in Syria, U.N. Special Envoy de Mistura announced that should the ceasefire hold, his aim will be to resume the peace negotiations on March 7.
21. Despite complaints of breaches from both sides of the conflict, the ceasefire in Syria largely held. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault called for a meeting of the ISSG Ceasefire Task Force to discuss the violations. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid is expected to reach 154,000 during the first week of March.

## WESTERN BALKANS

### 1. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA:

On February 11, Bosnia's High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council confirmed its previous decision to prohibit employees in judicial institutions from wearing religious symbols. This decision has drawn criticism, especially from Rijaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Dragan Covic handed Bosnia's application for EU membership on 15 February in Brussels. On February 17, the leader



of the ruling coalition party SBB Fahrudin Radonic was released from the custody after the Bosnia and Herzegovina Court ordered prohibiting measures on him. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Crnadak paid an official visit to Iran, where he met with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zari on February 22. Albanian President Bujar Nishani demanded from authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to revisit the stance for the recognition of Kosovo. Mr. Nishani made this request during his visit in the capital Sarajevo on February 24.

### 2. Kosovo:

Kosovo marked the 8th anniversary of its declaration of independence from Serbia on February 17. The central event that took place in Pristina was followed by opposition protests calling for the government's resignation and early elections. On February 19, the session in Kosovo parliament was interrupted several times after opposition MPs used tear gas in attempts to pressure the government into abandoning a deal related with the establishment of Community of Serbian Municipalities. The opposition was not allowed to return to the assembly hall after the third interruption of the session. Following this decision the president of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj filed an irrevocable resignation as MP. On February 26, Kosovo's MPs elected Hashim Thaci as the country's new president in the absence of opposition lawmakers. The prospect of a Thaci-presidency prompted thousands of opposition supporters to protest in the capital of Pristina.

### 3. FYR MACEDONIA:

The Turkish Embassy in Skopje condemned hate speech of Sitel TV Editor-in-Chief Dragan Pavlovic Latas. During an interview with the opposition leader Zoran Zaev on February 11, Pavlovic wishing to offend his interlocutor used the negative assertion about Turkish community. On February 23, Macedonia's parliament voted to annul its previous decision to dissolve parliament, and to postpone early elections planned for April 24. The MPs also agreed to postpone the general election until June 5 following political talks brokered by the EU and the US.

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### 4. MONTENEGRO:

Montenegro began Accession Talks with NATO on February 15. On February 19, the parliament dialogue between the ruling DPS and part of the opposition over ways to organize free and fair elections was completed unsuccessfully. The participants of parliamentary dialogue could not agree about the future of the Speaker of the Parliament Ranko Krivokapic and control over the public broadcaster RTCG. On February 25, leader of opposition party NOVA Andrija Mandic signed an agreement in Moscow on a joint political action with the Russian ruling party United Russia.

### 5. SERBIA:

On February 12, the Serbian parliament ratified an agreement between the Serbian government and NATO's Support and Procurement Organization (NSPO). The agreement entered into force after President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolic signed it on February 19. Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic, participated in the EBRD Investment Summit for Western Balkans and Croatia, held in London on 22 February. According to Serbian government, Serbian embassy staff members abducted in Libya in November were among nearly 50 people killed on Friday in US air strikes on a suspected ISIL training camp on February 19. The Pentagon said it has no evidence to corroborate Serbia's claim that two of its citizens were killed in the US air strike.

### THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE WESTERN BALKANS:

The police directors of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria agreed on joint action in the refugee crisis. Starting from February 18, the aforementioned states apply stricter border control and common procedures for profiling, registration and transport of refugees from the Greek-Macedonian border to Austria. The agreement envisages a quota for migrants and would allowed 580 of them to cross Austrian border a day through the "Balkan refugee route".

Subsequently, the number of refugees in the border area between Macedonia and Greece increased due to the implementation of restrictive measures for refugees entry to Macedonia. On February 25, after the session of the Council for National Security of Serbia, president Nikolic approved the use of the army if the police will not able to handle refugee crisis in Serbia. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Al Hussein Rad said the newly adopted measures will not contribute to solving the refugee crisis.

# RUSSIA

### INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

1. Russia's presidential press-secretary Dmitry Peskov, said on February 5 that there has been no contact between Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan. On February 10, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin paid an official visit to Iraq where he pointed out that presence of Turkish troops in North Iraq is not in accordance with international law.
2. The Russian ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin said that Turkey is helping ISIL in recruiting militants from the former Soviet Union. Churkin made these comments in the letter sent to the UN Security Council on February 10.
3. On February 20, a Russian draft resolution condemning any plans for foreign military intervention and violations of Syrian sovereignty was rejected by the US and France in the UN Security Council. Despite this fact, two days later Russia and the United States agreed on a new ceasefire in Syria starting on February 27 that would exclude attacks on ISIL and al-Qaeda's local affiliate, Al-Nusra Front. Additionally, Russia held bilateral meetings with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to agree on common positions on the ceasefire in Syria.
4. On February 9, Russia and Bahrain's delegations held a meeting on economic, energetic and military cooperation. President Putin welcomed Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban on February 17 in Moscow. Putin pointed out that despite the sanctions Hungary remains reliable Russia's partner. On February 17, Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu met with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Dehghan in Moscow. Shoygu stated that Russia continues to develop military relations with Iran, as well as common fight against international terrorism.
5. On February 18, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern over the ratification of a logistical support agreement between Serbia and NATO. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova noted that Moscow sees Serbia as a militarily-neutral country. The Permanent Representative of the Russia's to NATO Alexander Grushko marked that Montenegrin accession to NATO is another wrong step for Alliance.



### INTERNAL AFFAIRS

1. Russia sought an international arrest warrant for Mikhail Khodorkovsky due to the accusations of ordering two contract killings in 1998. The Interpol refused the Russian request for Khodorkovsky's search notice on February 12. The Russian Ministry for Far East Development supported a plan to offer citizenship and benefits to Ukrainian refugees who are willing to settle in remote areas in eastern regions and Siberia.
2. On February 18, the owner of Moscow's Domodedovo Airport Dmitry Kamenshik was arrested due to the investigation into the 2011 terrorist attack on the airport. The leader of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov announced he is stepping down from his political career in an interview on February 27. Kadyrov's presidential term expires in April. On 27 February, thousands of people marched in Moscow and other Russian cities in the memory of Boris Nemtsov, opposition politician who was killed last year.

## UKRAINE

1. On February 16, Ukraine's parliament failed to secure enough votes for a no-confidence measure on the ousting of PM Arseniy Yatsenyuk's government. Earlier on February 16, Ukraine's President Poroshenko called for Yatsenyuk to resign due to the government's unsatisfactory performance. On February 18, the Samopomich and Batkivshchyna parties left Ukraine's ruling coalition and accordingly ended the coalition's parliamentary majority. Ukraine's Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin submitted a letter of resignation to the Presidential Administration on February 19 after Poroshenko request.
2. Activists from Zakarpattia, Lviv and Volyn regions started to blocking cargo transport with Russian registration numbers from crossing Ukraine's border on February 12. Two days after blockades started Russia banned the transit of Ukrainian trucks through its territory, which led to Ukraine's official ban of Russian trucks. On February 24, both sides agreed to lift reciprocal transit bans on road cargo.
3. On February 18, Ukraine's lawmakers called on foreign states and parliamentary assemblies of international organizations to condemn Kremlin aggression against Ukraine. Earlier in the month, the European Parliament in Strasbourg condemned human rights abuses in Crimea and Russia's illegal annexation of the peninsula. The security situation in Eastern Ukraine deteriorated during February. Ukraine's forces reported the renewal of fighting in Donbas and Luhansk regions. On February 21, one Ukrainian soldier has been killed in Donbas, on the same day Ukrainian army came under sniper fire near Mariupol's port.
4. On February 19, EU Ambassador to Ukraine Jan Tombinski stated that the implementation of an electronic system for state officials to declare their assets is a condition for Ukraine to get visa-free travel to the EU. On February 23, President Poroshenko met with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his French counterpart Jean-Marc Ayrault as part of the talks on implementing the Minsk peace plan.



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## CONTACT DETAILS

### Global Political Trends Center (GPoT)

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

