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# Regional Updates

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### CYPRUS

1. A comprehensive solution to the Cyprus dispute would be favorable to the strategic relationship between Turkey and the EU, according to European Council's President Donald Tusk. Tusk said this in a statement during a press conference in Ankara with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on March 3.
2. On March 8, Baris Burcu, the spokesman for Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, confirmed the importance of Turkey's guarantees for a post-solution Cyprus but he pointed out the necessity of creating a more comprehensive system of guarantees based on the current situation in Cyprus.
3. On March 15, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades said that Cyprus will not accept the EU's deal with Turkey on migrants if Turkey does not fulfill its obligations in the Cyprus question. According to Anastasiades, Cyprus will block the opening of any new chapters in Turkey's EU accession negotiations. Following Anastasiades's statements, Turkish Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator, Volkan Bozki called on the EU to prevent Cyprus to spoil a migrant agreement between Turkey and EU.
4. Regarding the EU-Turkey Agreement on migrants, Turkish Cypriot President Mustafa Akinci said that the Cyprus settlement depends on Greek Cypriots, and the island's problem cannot be solved in Brussels. In a written statement dated on March 17, Akinci expressed concern over the possible intention of the Greek Cypriot side to exclude Turkish Cypriots from the reunification talks and make Turkey its interlocutor instead.
5. On March 21, Cypriot Greek Defense Minister Christophoros Fokaides announced that military reforms include modernization, redeployment and armament programmes for army, navy and air forces. Furthermore, Fokaides said that recruitment of professional soldiers would set up conditions to cut military service from 24 to 14 months starting next year.
6. On March 25, the Turkish Foreign Ministry pointed out that the Greek Cypriot government's decision to open the tender for the third hydrocarbons exploration round within the island's EEZ violates the Turkish Cypriot side's equal rights on common natural resources. Additionally, this decision also violates Turkey's continental shelf rights, and due to these reasons Turkey would not allow foreign companies to explore hydrocarbons in the disputed area. The Cyprus foreign ministry rejected claims of the Turkish side as "provocative and destabilizing", and confirmed its intention to proceed with a third hydrocarbons exploration round.
7. During his official visit to Cyprus, European Parliament President Martin Schulz said on March 27 that the EU will be the best guarantee for a prosperous and bright future in the context of a federal Cyprus. Additionally, Schulz held meetings with Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci and Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades.



## REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

8. On March 30, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Elizabeth Spehar as his new Special Representative and head of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).
9. Cyprus officially exited an EU-IMF bailout programme on March 31, the island used €7.25bn of the total €10bn earmarked in the bailout.

## EGYPT

### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. Lawyers demanded harsher charges for the police sergeant who shot dead a driver in the Darb el-Ahmar district of Cairo.
2. Public figures led by Amr Moussa announced the formation of a non-governmental organization called the “Egyptian Institution to Protect the Constitution”.
3. The Egyptian Parliament began drafting a bill to ban women from wearing the full veil, or niqab, in public places.
4. Former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi called for a more democratic alternative to el-Sisi’s current government.
5. Egypt’s Justice Minister was relieved of his duties following his reportedly blasphemous comments, leaving Parliamentary Affairs Minister Magdi el-Agati as the interim Justice Minister.
6. The Egyptian Parliament submitted new amendments to the Police Law to introduce harsher punishments for rights violations committed by the police.
7. On March 21, Prime Minister Sherif Ismail met with President el-Sisi to finalize the first phase of a cabinet reshuffle of 10 ministers.
8. After a bombing killed 15 security personnel in North Sinai, counterterrorist operations intensified to include more air assaults, raids, and explosive disposals.
9. A presidential decree relieved Egypt’s top auditor Hisham Geneina in the end of March, due to his comments about the losses worth \$76 billion which resulted from widespread corruption within the government.



### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

1. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi announced a government-led development plan, partly financed by Saudi Arabia (via \$1.5 billion) for Sinai, to help improve the socio-economic condition of the Sinai peninsula and further connect it to Egypt.
2. Egypt’s Central Bank removed the restrictions on individuals and corporations to deposit or withdraw dollars. The measure was imposed last year to combat the country’s foreign exchange crisis.
3. The Central Bank dismissed reports that it is preparing to start negotiations for a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
4. 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.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

### INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. A \$23 billion deal between Saudi Arabia and Egypt was agreed upon for the former to increase the quantity of imported oil from 500,000 to 700,000 tons per year for the upcoming 5 years.
2. Egypt's Defense Minister and his Cypriot counterpart Christophoros Fokaides signed a military cooperation agreement on March 1 to strengthen marine and energy security and cooperation.
3. In respect to state sovereignty, President el-Sisi emphasized the importance of Egypt not intervening militarily in Libya.
4. President el-Sisi met with Saudi King Salman following the "Thunder of the North" military exercise to discuss the regional developments and bilateral relations.
5. 16 Egyptian organizations sent a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid al-Hussein, expressing concern for the human rights situation in Egypt. Similarly, in reference to the probe into NGO activities, John Kerry called for the Egyptian government to work with civil society organizations and ease restrictions. The criticism was immediately rejected by Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry.
6. In response to PhD student Giulio Regeni's murder, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution to reassess the export of military support to Egypt. Viewed as an 'interference' in domestic affairs, the resolution was rejected by the Egyptian Parliament.
7. After the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) and Arab League decisions to label Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, Egypt proceeded to ban its leaders from entering the state.
8. After denying the Interior Minister Magdy Abdel Ghaffar's claims that it coordinated the assassination of Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas sent a delegation of senior officials to Cairo to hold talks with officials from Egypt's military intelligence. Once concluded, public signs of support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza were removed.
9. Developments on doctoral candidate Giulio Regeni's murder: a compilation of documents from the investigation into Regeni's murder was sent to the office of the Ministry of International Cooperation; on March 14, Prosecutor-General Nabil Sadek met with Italian Attorney General Giuseppe Buitoni to share the findings of the investigation; in a speech by President el-Sisi, he raised several questions on the murder of Regeni and voiced the importance of maintaining the strength of bilateral relations; and a criminal gang allegedly linked to the murder of Regeni was killed in a shootout between with the police forces. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi immediately casted doubt on the gang's linkage to the murder.
10. Hamas senior official Khalil al-Haya called for Egypt to ease the Gaza blockade and allow more traffic through the Rafah border crossing.
11. The Defense Ministers of 27 African and Arab states attended a meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh from March 24-26 to address issues of deteriorating security, conflict resolution, and drug and arms trafficking. They concluded with an agreement to strengthen military and counter-terrorism cooperation.
12. A man hijacked an EgyptAir domestic flight from Alexandria to Cairo and diverted it to land in Cyprus, claiming that he was wearing a suicide belt. After releasing the passengers and making demands to deliver a letter to his divorcee, he surrendered and was arrested.
13. Foreign Minister Shoukry met with Secretary of State Kerry in Washington to discuss bilateral relations and developments in Sinai, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

### SYRIA

1. Several reports purported from different sides of the conflict that the Syrian regime, its allies, the rebels, and the People's Protection Units (YPG) have not abided by the truce, especially in Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, and Hama.
2. A nationwide power outage was reported by the Syrian Ministry of Electricity on March 3. Meanwhile, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said that although going "better than expected", the truce was "close to collapse" because of the continued hostilities and accumulating reinforcements in some areas.
3. On March 4, U.N. Adviser to Syria de Mistura, Jan Egeland, said that a deal is being concluded to facilitate the expedited delivery of medical supplies to rebel-held areas in Syria. On the same day, hundreds of protesters in several rebel-held towns organized peaceful anti-Assad protests
4. U.N. Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura delayed the Syria peace talks to bolster the truce agreement, which appeared to be holding, apart from a number of reported violations. The HNC and Saudi Arabia outlined their concerns of humanitarian aid and al-Assad's fate respectively.
5. In north Syria, the U.S. nearly completed the construction of two air bases in Kurdish-controlled regions for both military and civilian utility. In southeast Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) announced that Syrian rebels seized the border crossing of Tanaf from ISIS.
6. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu agreed in a meeting that both Iran and Turkey share the goal of wanting to end the war in Syria and provide aid to the displaced populations.
7. Following an overnight meeting in Brussels between PM Davutoğlu and EU leaders, an breakthrough agreement was reached on the management of the refugee crisis. The agreement outline of "one in, one out" entailed that all asylum-seekers reaching Greece would be sent to Turkey on the condition that one refugee in Turkey would be resettled in the EU. In addition, Turkey would receive eased visa regulations for its citizens and reopen the stalled talks of Turkey's accession to the EU.
8. Retiring U.S. General Lloyd Austin III, currently overseeing operations against ISIS, requested the rebooting of a training program for the Syrian rebels to improve specific skills over a shorter amount of time.
9. Pentagon Correspondent Barbara Starr said that the U.S. intelligence is assessing the result of an airstrike conducted near the Syrian town of al-Shadadi, which targeted ISIS Minister of War Omar al-Shishani. Initial reports by Syrian opposition groups claimed that he is "critically injured".
10. Despite claims that al-Assad is preparing for an upcoming escalation, Syria's HNC announced they would attend the peace talks in Geneva in an effort to end the war in Syria. Russia confirmed that the Syrian government would attend and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the Kurdish groups should also be represented.



## REGIONAL UPDATES: SYRIA

11. Despite some international powers showing willingness to discuss the proposal of federalism, viewing it as a possible key to ending the civil war, three parties to the conflict rejected the proposal. First, the Head of the HNC claimed that it was “not acceptable at all”; second, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov similarly denounced plans of federalism and affirmed the Syrians’ role in deciding the country’s future; and third, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem rejected the concept of federalization as a solution; ruled out presidential elections and from the peace talks in Geneva; and drew a red line on the Opposition’s demands for an interim government.
12. While clashes continued in the cities of Dar’aa, Aleppo, and the governorate of Rif Dimashq, a warplane was shot down by Syrian rebels in the city of Hama.
13. On March 14, there were three significant developments: first, Russia expressed its willingness to coordinate its actions with the U.S.-led coalition to reverse ISIS’ gains in the eastern city of Raqqa; second, U.N. Adviser to Syria de Mistura underlined the importance of protecting the Geneva peace talks from collapse and not setting preconditions for the negotiations. Subsequently, to start the first of three rounds of negotiations, de Mistura met with the Syrian government delegation and described the meeting as useful. Third, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the preparation for the withdrawal of the majority of Russian armed forces from Syria. The Syrian Government confirmed that the withdrawal was agreed upon and coordinated between both sides.
14. Syria’s U.N. ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari refused to engage in direct talks with the HNC’s top negotiator and representative of Army of Islam Mohamed Alloush, calling him a “terrorist”.
15. On March 17, Staffan de Mistura met with ‘pro-Russia’ opposition from the Moscow, Cairo, and Istana groups, who later confirmed that they will join the Geneva peace talks to play a complementary—not a competitive—role. They strongly called for the inclusion of Kurdish representation in the negotiations. Meanwhile, Syrian Kurds declared an autonomous federation in northern Syria, comprised of three Kurdish-controlled regions. They also expressed their hopes to see the “model of federalism applied to all of Syria.” The announcement was immediately rejected by Turkey and the Syrian government as having “no legal basis” and viewed by the HNC as “unacceptable”, as well as U.S. Defense Chief Ash Carter.
16. U.N. Special Envoy de Mistura shuttled between meetings with the opposition and government representation. While the opposition presented an elaborate paper on the operation of a transitional governing body, de Mistura conceded that the Syrian regime ruled out any discussion of the matter, instead focusing on the technical procedures of the talks. HNC top negotiator Mohammed Alloush said a transitional body needs to have powers of the president, parliament, and courts. In addition, he called for the release of prisoners; and the heightened involvement of the U.S. and EU, while emphasizing that the latter needs to address the root cause of the conflict to stem the flow of refugees to Europe.
17. One day after the terrorist attacks on the Brussels’ Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini called for progress in the Geneva peace talks in order to tackle the ISIS regional threat.

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18. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry concluded talks with Lavrov in Moscow and announced their agreement for “establishing a framework for a political transition [in Syria] and also a draft constitution, [...] by August”. They also agreed to facilitate direct talks between the Syrian government and the opposition, which are scheduled to begin on April 11, to create a transitional governing body. In the meantime, HNC spokeswoman Bassma Kodmani issued a warning after the the first round of peace talks that there is a risk of failure if Putin is not able to persuade al-Assad to agree to a compromise.
19. With the support of Russian airstrikes, Syrian government forces retook the city of Palmyra from ISIS after a three-week operation, and boasted its efficiency and possible expansion of counter terrorism operations in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor. In addition to being a UNESCO World Heritage site, the Palmyra connects the southwest to the northwest through a network of roads, which makes it of strategic importance.
20. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied reports that claimed there was any agreement between the U.S. and Russia on the future of al-Assad.
21. In an interview with Russia’s RIA news agency, President al-Assad said that he would hold early presidential elections if that was the desire of the Syrian people and that “opposition forces and forces loyal to the state” could be part of a new government. He also highlighted that in rebuilding Syria, the country will rely on Russia, Iran, and China for assistance.

## WESTERN BALKANS

### 1. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA:

On FBosnia and Herzegovina marked 24 years of independence on March 1, likewise in the recent years the Bosnian independence anniversary was not celebrated in Republika Srpska. On March 18, Bakir Izetbegovic took over the position of the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Dragan Covic. On March 24, The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia convicted former Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan



Karadzic of genocide and crimes against humanity. The ICTY found Karadzic guilty on 10 charges out of 11 and sentenced him to 40 years in prison. The Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bakir Izetbegovic stated that the Karadzic verdict is not only important for Bosnia, but for the Balkans, and the entire world. Izetbegovic said that if the verdict against Karadzic includes new elements incriminating former Serbian leadership, Sarajevo will file a new genocide lawsuit against Belgrade. Furthermore, the President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik noted that the Karadzic verdict would contribute to new divisions within Bosnia.

### 2. Kosovo:

On March 2, Kosovo police arrested the leader of the Self Determination Party Visar Ymeri due to a warrant issued by the Court of First Instance in Pristina. On March 17, Prime Minister Isa Mustafa met in Brussels with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini. Mustafa pointed out that Kosovo delivered the criteria for the EU liberalization of visas, on the other side Mogherini confirmed EU's willingness to provide a visa-free regime for Kosovo citizens, once the criteria are met. On March 23, Prime Minister Isa Mustafa rejected the opposition call for holding early parliamentary elections. On March 24, the President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga paid an official visit to the US, where she met with the US Vice President, Joe Biden. In their meeting, Biden stated that the US strongly supports the talks on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

### 3. FYR MACEDONIA:

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of US, Hoyt Brian Yee visited Skoplje on March 3, where he held meetings with the four main political parties and state leaders. The main topics of these meetings were ongoing political instability in Macedonia and the refugee crisis. On March 17, Macedonia and Bulgaria agreed to conduct joint operations for border control and protection in order to effectively respond to the refugee crisis. On March 29, the Macedonian Parliament decided to extend the state of emergency until December 31 along its borders as a result of an increased influx of migrants entering and transiting Macedonia.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: WEST BALKANS

### **MONTENEGRO:**

On March 10, the European Parliament in a non-binding resolution welcomed the progress made in EU accession talks with Montenegro and its commitment to implement international restrictive measures. Moreover, the resolution marked corruption in Montenegro as a serious concern, particularly in public procurement, healthcare, education, spatial planning, privatization and construction sectors. On March 24, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, Igor Luksic confirmed his intention to resign in order to solely focus on his candidacy for the UN Secretary-General. Prime Minister of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic paid a two-day official visit to Brussels, where he met with high EU officials. The focus of the meeting was on Montenegro's accession to EU, as well as on political and security situation in Balkans.

### **4. SERBIA:**

On March 4, the Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic signed a decree dissolving parliament in order to call for early general elections. Serbia is set for early elections on April 24 after the government said that the new cabinet needs a “clear mandate” to push through economic reforms and complete EU accession. President Nikolic met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 10. Following the meeting, Nikolic said that Moscow will continue to back Serbia's claim to Kosovo. On March 24, Serbia commemorated the 17th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. On March 25, The Serbian government said the verdict convicting Radovan Karadzic must not be used to undermine Republika Srpska, and to indicate that all Serbs are collectively guilty for crimes committed during Bosnian conflict. On March 31, the Hague tribunal for the former Yugoslavia found Serbian Radical Party leader Vojislav Seselj not guilty for crimes against humanity in Croatia and Bosnia committed by Serbian militias between 1991 and 1993.

## RUSSIA

### INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

1. On March 1, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin said the UN Security Council must adopt the resolution to tighten sanctions on North Korea.
2. On March 7, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi held a telephone conversation and emphasized the significance of creating the conditions for the resumption of Russian flights to Egypt. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shukri held a telephone conversation on March 8 and assessed positively the results of the Syria ceasefire.
3. The European Union on March 10 extended sanctions against 46 Russian and Ukrainian individuals and 37 companies for six more months.
4. On March 13, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said Russia has evidence that Turkish troops are in Syria where they are conducting a sort of “creeping expansion”. On March 17, Lavrov called on a decisive reaction of the international community due to the Turkish shelling of Syrian territory.
5. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a troop withdrawal from Syria on March 15. However, Russia’s military bases in Tartous and Khmeimim will continue their normal operations. According to Putin, Russian armed force completely fulfilled its task in Syria and he expressed hope that the withdrawal will foster a political resolution of the Syrian conflict.
6. Russia has officially started to provide the Iraqi Kurds with weapons and delivered the first batch of anti-aircraft guns to Kurdish forces in northern Iraq on March 21.
7. President Putin received in the Kremlin US Secretary of State John Kerry on March 24. They discussed the Syria ceasefire as well as the situation in Ukraine. Following the meeting, Putin said that Russia and the US could find common interest to address bilateral and international issues.
8. Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko said on March 25 that Russia is ready to resume normal relations with Turkey on condition that Ankara takes the blame for the downing of the Russian combat jet. On March 26, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova in a radio interview said that the dispute between Russia and Turkey is only temporary.
9. Russia’s presidential press-secretary Dmitry Peskov, said on March 26 that Russia is at war with “Anglo-Saxon” media outlets who are carrying out a negative campaign against Moscow and the Russian President Vladimir Putin.



### INTERNAL AFFAIRS

1. On March 11, the Prosecutor General’s Office decided that the National Democratic Institute (NDI), chaired by a former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright’s poses a serious threat to Russian

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security. The decision proposes including the NDI on the list of undesirable foreign organizations in Russia.

2. On March 18, President Putin visited Crimea on the second anniversary of Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. The mass rally was organized in Moscow on the same day celebrating Crimea's reunification anniversary with Russia.
3. On March 21, a court in south Russia convicted Ukrainian combat jet pilot Nadia Savchenko on charges of murder and illegal border crossing and sentenced her to 22 years in prison. Savchenko has been found guilty for the deaths of two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine in June 2014.
4. On March 25, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the order appointing Ramzan Kadyrov acting head of the Chechen Republic until presidential elections are scheduled for September 18. Furthermore, Putin said that he personally hopes that Kadyrov will run for the new presidential term.

## UKRAINE

1. March 1, the Ukrainian government banned government officials from expressing public criticism towards the work of state institutions. The governmental decree introduces principles of “serving the state and the public,” political neutrality, transparency and accountability.
2. The press center of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) reported that 3 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and another 14 wounded in the Donbas on March 2. According to the ATO, Russian-backed separatist forces made a grave violation of the Minsk agreements on March 3, deploying large-caliber weapons against the Ukrainian army.
3. On March 4, foreign ministers from Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany met in Paris over Minsk peace deal.
4. On March 9-10, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko paid an official visit to Turkey where he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They discussed ways to increase cooperation between the two countries, as well as the situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.
5. On March 15, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the bill required by the EU under Ukraine’s visa liberalization action plan, obliging officials to declare their property. The European Commission announced on March 18 that Ukraine had met all requirements to enter into a visa-free regime with the European Union.
6. On March 21, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said that Ukraine will never recognize the verdict against Ukrainian combat jet pilot Nadia Savchenko. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine expressed strong protest against the Savchenko verdict, emphasizing the deterioration of Savchenko’s health condition during her detention.
7. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed a demobilization decree of the military on March 26. Following the decree, approximately 45,000 conscripts of the fourth mobilization wave returned home.



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