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Regional Updates

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CYPRUS

BY DUYGU ALPAN

The Turkish vessel, Barbaros, carrying out seismic survey on behalf of the Turkish Cypriots withdrew from the disputed maritime zone for a period of time as the Navigational Telex (NAVTEX) expired in the end of December. While the next move of the Turkish vessel was still uncertain, the Greek Cypriots noted that they would not return to the negotiation table unless their second precondition—for Turkey to demonstrate respect to Greek Cypriot sovereignty—is met in addition to the termination of the seismic research in the area.



On January 6, the Turkish Cypriot side made an announcement highlighting that despite their expectations that the Greek Cypriot side would “end its unilateral drilling activities” in the East-Med, they did not only “expand the drilling site and extend its activities up until 29 March 2015”, but also continued putting forward preconditions for the peace talks to be resumed. In this respect, Turkey published another NAVTEX on behalf of the Turkish Cypriot people that enables the Barbaros vessel to continue its activities in the region between January 6 and April 6, 2015.

As the stalemate on the comprehensive peace negotiations continues, the international community expressed concern regarding the state of affairs in Cyprus. UN Ambassador to Nicosia John Koenig said on January 7, “it is now more than three months since settlement talks were suspended. Time works against a positive outcome”. On the other hand, the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide, who made a brief visit to the island from 13 to 14 January, said “there are no prospects for an immediate meeting” regarding the peace talks adding that “[talks] are de facto moving in the wrong direction”.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon reiterated his “call to both sides to refrain from the ‘blame game’ and from negative rhetoric about each other” in a report on the UN Operation in Cyprus, submitted to the Security Council on January 9. It was also stressed in the report that any natural resources found around Cyprus should benefit both communities of the island. Referring to opposite arguments, both the Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots claimed that the report does not correspond with reality and is not written in an objective manner.

On January 26, the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide briefed the UN Security Council on the current situation in Cyprus. Eide noted that the Council expressed its strong support for the Good Offices Mission’s efforts and reiterated the importance of a speedy resumption of talks. He also remarked that the Council reaches consensus on the Cyprus question unlike many other issues in the world.

UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on January 29 extending the mandate of United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) until 31 July 2015. The members of the Council, among other things, called “for renewed efforts to implement all remaining confidence building measures” and urged both sides to further implement “mutually-acceptable steps”.

On the Greek Cypriot side of the island, Cyprus Airways was shut down after the European Commission’s order to refund the state aid that it received illegally. Meanwhile, it was also reported that French energy company Total is likely to halt its search for oil and gas in Cyprus’ offshore since it failed to find tangible evidence supporting existence of considerable amount of resources.

Sources and Further Reading (click to access)

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[Jan. 1, 2015 - Greek Cyprus warns Turkey to stop ‘bullying’ over gas](#)

[Jan. 5, 2015 - Cyprus says no talks while Turkish ships mount a challenge on gas](#)

[Jan. 6, 2015 - Regarding unilateral exploration activities of the Greek Cypriot side](#)

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[Jan. 7, 2015 - Turkish vessel’s oil exploration work off Cyprus extended](#)

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[Jan. 9, 2015 - Report of the Secretary-General on the UN operations in Cyprus](#)

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[Jan. 13, 2015 – Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimi 19 Nisan’da yapılacak](#)

[Jan. 14, 2015 - UN envoy says Cyprus peace talks moving ‘in wrong direction’](#)

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[Jan. 16, 2015 - Turkey to begin supplying water to Northern Cyprus](#)

[Jan. 21, 2015 - Total to halt Cyprus natgas drilling](#)

[Jan. 25, 2015 - Small window remains for Total deal](#)

[Jan. 26, 2015 - Security Council Media Stakeout – Eide & Buitenheim](#)

[Jan. 27, 2015 - Turkish Cypriot negotiator urges suspension of gas drilling](#)

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[Jan. 29, 2015 - Security Council Extends Mandate of UNFICYP](#)

EGYPT

BY OMAR SHEIRA

In Egypt, New Year's Day coincided with the Mawlid Festival, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. In a speech on January 1, President Abdelfattah el-Sisi addressed the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and called for a revolution in Islamic thought to counter prevalent extremist ideologies. El-Sisi urged scholars of Al-Azhar to play a leading role in this process of religious reform by promoting the humanistic ideals of Islamic civility, consciousness, manners, and ethics. Less than a week later, el-Sisi became the first Egyptian president to visit the St. Mark Cathedral during Coptic Christmas Eve mass and send a message of unity and tolerance.



In Cairo's political sphere, the upcoming March elections were announced by the election commission to consist of two phases: the first, on March 22-23; and the second, on April 26-27. President el-Sisi extended a message of unity to political parties by calling on them to resolve their differences and form a unified national electoral list. In response to the ambitious goal, a meeting comprising 19 parties was organized at the headquarters of Al-Wafd Party, although no results materialized due to the difference in the parties' visions. The Supreme Election Committee announced that candidates could start registration procedures on February 8.

As the fourth anniversary of the January 25 Revolution dawned on Egypt, security was tightened in several Egyptian cities. Upon the eruption of anti-government protests, clashes ensued between protesters and policemen, resulting in the deaths of 23, among which were policemen and civilians, the injury of 97, and the arrests of 516 people. The particular shooting of Shaimaa el-Sabbagh, a member of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, during a commemoration march, led to more protests in downtown Cairo.

In legal developments, Egypt's highest court ordered a retrial of three Al-Jazeera journalists, who have also applied for presidential deportation under the new law passed in November 2014. In the trials of former presidents, an appeal was accepted in Hosni Mubarak's case by the top prosecutor, due to a "legal flaw" in the verdict; and a final verdict for Mohamed Morsi is due on May 16, in his espionage trial. Finally, following the January 25 clashes, Alaa and Gamal Mubarak, who still face corruption and insider trading charges, were released from Cairo's prison after being held for four years.

In regional and international affairs, there were four main developments. First, the Arab League and Al-Azhar condemned the Charlie Hebdo shooting attack which resulted in the killing of 12 people. Egypt's Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy also traveled to Paris to participate in the Silent March with other global leaders. Second, el-Sisi and Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi discussed bilateral relations and how sectarian violence can be countered. Third, Egypt rejected Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam storage capacity,

stating that it could negatively impact its water supply. Finally, on January 21-24, el-Sisi attended the Davos World Economic Forum, where he delivered a speech on Egypt's current security and economic challenges, and spoke of a new reality which can emerge in the Middle East, upon the establishment of an Israeli-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution.

Concluding with Sinai, the military continued its extensive operations to secure the peninsula of the threat posed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), Afnad Misr, and other extremist elements. The operations included uncovering and destroying smuggling tunnels between Sinai and Gaza; unfolding potential attacks through raids and arrests; and finally, advancing the second phase of the Gaza Buffer Zone, through forced evacuations and demolition of 313 houses. North Sinai Governor Abdelfattah Harhour also announced the Buffer Zone's expansion to 5 kilometers from the border. Despite all efforts, on January 29, the Islamic State-affiliated ABM was able to lead more than four coordinated attacks on military headquarters, police bases, and a hotel in the Northern Sinai towns of Arish, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuwayed. The attacks left at least 30 people dead, and more than 100 people wounded. President el-Sisi cut short his visit to Addis Ababa, where he was attending the African Union Summit, and returned to Egypt. Vowing that the campaign against extremism will be long, el-Sisi established a new counter-terrorism unit, led by Chief of Staff Osama Roshdy, to address the threats in Sinai and the east of Suez.

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- [Jan. 6, 2015 - Sisi first Egyptian President to attend Coptic Christmas mass](#)
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- [Jan. 8, 2015 - Arab League, Al-Azhar condemn Paris shooting attack](#)
- [Jan. 8, 2015 - Egypt to hold two-phase parliamentary election in March and April](#)
- [Jan. 9, 2015 - Prosecutor accepts appeal in Mubarak trial](#)
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- [Jan. 13, 2015 - Egypt rejects Ethiopia dam storage capacity](#)
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- [Jan. 21, 2015 - Sisi's call for national election coalition "impossible": party leader](#)
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- [Jan. 27, 2015 - Egypt confirms jail terms for leading liberal activists](#)
- [Jan. 27, 2015 - Deadly bomb blast rocks Egypt's Alexandria](#)
- [Jan. 27, 2015 - Egypt's economic growth expected to go 'easily north of 4 percent'](#)
- [Jan. 28, 2015 - Interior Minister says will confront all forms lawlessness](#)
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ISRAEL-PALESTINE

BY MUHAMMED AMMASH

The end of January came with tense developments in the occupied Golan Heights after an Israeli air strike on the Syrian side resulted in the killing of an Iranian general and several top Hezbollah officials. Hezbollah's retaliation to Israel's deadly strike by antitank missiles killed two Israeli soldiers. After the reciprocal attacks, Hezbollah announced through the UN that it is backing away from additional attacks.



Further violent clashes in the region were seen throughout the month. While clashes between Palestinian youth and Israeli police continue in East Jerusalem, Tel Aviv witnessed another stabbing attack that left 12 people wounded. The stabbing came two days after the killing of two Palestinian citizens of Israel by Israeli forces, resulting in a general strike and other protests by Israeli Arabs.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated that the state of Palestine would join the International Criminal Court (ICC) on April 1. The prosecutor of the ICC said that she has opened initial probe into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu slammed the decision saying it is "absurd". Moreover, as a protest to Palestine's move, Israel froze the transfer of tax collections to the Palestinian Authority (PA), and according to Israeli sources, Israel may sue Palestinian officials abroad for war crimes. On the other hand, a US Republican senator has warned that Palestine could lose crucial American aid if they attempt to sue Israel for atrocities carried out in the last conflict.

Although several countries granted certain amounts of funds to the PA as direct support for its budget and the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, the economic situation in Palestine remains unstable. Only 60 percent of the December PA salaries were paid on 19 January. At the same time, UNRWA reported that it has spent its last available funds on repairs, and announced that it is seeking USD 1.6 billion for emergency relief, early recovery and reconstruction priorities in Gaza¹.

As elections in Israel are approaching, bitter confrontations between different political camps continue. While diverse Israeli Arab political parties have joined their forces into one list, different polls show the contentious struggle between Netanyahu's Likud and Livni-Herzog's Zionist Camp.

Regarding international actors in the region, US envoy to the UN Samantha Powers, announced an upcoming Quartet meeting. Moreover, both Turkish and Egyptian presidents have welcomed President Abbas, who during his Turkey visit vowed to return to the Security Council with a renewed statehood

¹ Find a strategic response to the Gaza 2014 hostilities on the UNRWA website: http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/strategic_response_to_gaza_2014_hostilities.pdf

bid. However, Fatah officials said that they had accepted the US request to delay the bid until after the March 17 elections in Israel.

Abbas briefed President Sisi on Israel's violations against Jerusalem's Christian and Islamic holy sites, expressing his concerns about a shift from a political conflict into a religious one. Meanwhile, the dispute between Turkey and Israel continues as Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu accused Israel of "crimes against humanity." Furthermore, according to several Israeli and international sources, Qatar expelled the head of Hamas' political bureau to Turkey – a claim denied by Hamas.

As Abbas and Netanyahu joined the 'unity' march for Charlie Hebdo in Paris, both avoided any contact. Their stand against violence in Paris could not yet be put into practice at home – 19 year old Ahmed Najjar, who has been claimed to be at the point of throwing a molotov cocktail, was shot dead by Israeli army on 31 January near Nablus.

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