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# Regional Updates

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## CYPRUS

BY DUYGU ALPAN

The month of March ended with the Turkish exploratory vessel Barbaros' departure from its location of operation, on the 30th—prior to the NAVTEX issued by the Turkish Cypriot side expires—following the Eni-Kogas drilling vessel Sapiem 1000's withdrawal from the region. After the sailing away of both vessels, the Turkish Cypriot authorities reiterated their expectation for the Greek Cypriot side to return to the negotiation table without stipulating preconditions that may cause further delay in the peace process. Earlier in March, the Turkish Cypriot Foreign Minister, Özdil Nami, stated that the Turkish Cypriots would not issue a new NAVTEX after the current one expires on April 6, considering that Sapiem 1000 would be overhauled for a period of three months. Nami also added, “if the negotiations commence within this three month period and in the meantime the Greek Cypriots once again embark on natural gas explorations, we will have no other choice but to respond accordingly.”



UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Cyprus, Espen Barth Eide met with political leaders from both sides of the Green Line from March 16 to 18. Eide's last visit to the island was much more optimistic than the previous one. He demonstrated the growing sense through the hydrocarbon crisis to be overcome soon, and the negotiations to resume within the next weeks as the political circumstances gradually reshape. The Special Adviser noted that the negotiations will not only recommence shortly, but also be accelerated than originally planned, having said that it is not yet confirmed and officially declared. Regarding how the hydrocarbon crisis is to be tackled, Eide addressed the, then expected, termination of the seismic survey activities in the region, which would lead the sides to revive the negotiations in a position same as in the initial phase.

The Supreme Election Committee announced the candidates of the presidential elections to take place on April 19 in the Turkish Cypriot side. According to the official announcement, 5 independent candidates out of 7 will run for the position, who are namely Sibel Siber of Republican Turkish Party-United Forces (CTP-BG), Mustafa Onurer of Cyprus Socialist Party, Derviş Eroğlu, Kudret Özersay, Mustafa Akıncı, Arif Salih Kırdag, and Mustafa Ulaş.

On March 2, the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) sent a letter to FIFA indicating its aspiration to open a “representation office” in the Turkish Cypriot side in order to “help the Turkish football players” on the island. The Turkish Cypriot Football Federation (CTFA) and a number of Turkish Cypriot politicians condemned this endeavor, which they described as humiliation and ignoring the self-institutions of the Turkish Cypriots, and viewed it as intolerable. On the other hand, the Turkish Cypriot Deputy Prime Minister, Serdar Denктаş, promoted TFF in its initiative, and sharply criticized

those who objected to a TFF representation office in the Turkish Cypriot side. Following these heated debates, on March 30, the CTFA applied for membership of the UEFA-recognized Cyprus Football Association (CFF) in the Greek Cypriot side of the Green Line. Despite some harsh reactions raised against CTFA for its attempt, this initiative is considered as a prospective football reunification on the divided island, in view of the fact that numerous difficulties remain ahead.

The Greek Cypriot side signed an agreement with the energy company, Total, on March 18, regarding further exploration works in the Block 11 in the Eastern Mediterranean. The agreement, which authorizes Total to undertake assessment in the area, was signed in the framework of the existing contractual relationship between the Greek Cypriot side and Total. Furthermore, Greek Cypriot officials announced on March 17 that Noble Energy is expected to declare soon that gas reserves discovered in the Aphrodite field are commercially viable. On the other hand, Eni-Kogas reportedly failed to encounter any exploitable gas off Cyprus.

The Bicomunal Cyprus Dialogue Forum was launched on March 12, with a press conference held in Nicosia's Buffer Zone, with the participation of representatives and political parties, civil society organizations, unions and business world from both sides of the divided island. The UNDP-ACT supported Forum shared its joint declaration where it states that the Forum is "created as a response to a need for an inclusive and permanent space for structured dialogue and knowledge-sharing in which issues and challenges of common concern can be addressed", and that it is committed to "create common understandings and shared visions of the future."

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## EGYPT

BY OMAR SHEIRA

The month of March began with key legal developments in different domains. In the political domain, the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that two Parliamentary Election Laws were unconstitutional and subsequently, delayed the elections until an assembled legislative committee and political party representatives agree to the redrafting of the disputed laws. In the economic domain—in anticipation of Egypt’s Economic Development Conference (EEDC)—the cabinet approved an investment law, to improve accountability and lessen bureaucratic burdens; and a tax law reform, to lower the tax ceiling for high-income companies and attract foreign investment to stimulate the Egyptian economy.



Prior to the EEDC, the government tightened security on the Suez-South Sinai road to ensure that all roads leading to Sinai are secure. On March 13, over 2,000 delegates—including 30 heads of state, business executives, and entrepreneurs—from 112 countries, attended the two day economic conference in Sharm el-Sheikh. The EEDC was concluded with investment deals, financed projects, and loans worth more than \$138 billion, in the fields of energy, food security, housing, healthcare, education, vocational training, and transportation. Additionally, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman pledged \$12.5 billion in financial aid. During the Summit, el-Sisi revealed plans of a new, 17,000-acre business and administrative capital, as an eastern expansion to Cairo. The city, which will cost roughly \$45 billion, is scheduled for completion in five to seven years and will have the capacity to house approximately 5 million people.

As a part of cabinet reshuffle, a new Interior Minister, Mohamed Ibrahim was appointed to address the continued bombings in most Egyptian governorates. Throughout the month, official reports cited attacks by Muslim Brotherhood members and other extremist groups as Ansar Beyt al-Maqdis (ABM) and Afnad Misr, mainly targeting energy, communication, mass transportation, government offices, and military personnel. The attacks were concentrated on Alexandria, Cairo, Fayoum, Sharqia, and Sinai. Three notable bombings occurred near Cairo’s High Court, wounding 9 people; Cairo University, wounding 8 people; and Arish’s camp of Central Security Forces, killing 4 and wounding 47 military personnel. In securing the Sinai Peninsula, the Buffer Zone entered its third phase of evacuations, to expand the Zone by 2,000 meters from the Gaza border.

A number of judicial developments also took place in Egypt’s courts, where 213 suspected militants were put on trial for forming and joining a terrorist organization and attacking the state; a supporter of former President Mohamed Morsi was executed on charges of murder during the 2013 riots; a retrial in an embezzlement case was scheduled for former President Hosni Mubarak, and his two sons, Gamal

and Alaa Mubarak, on April 4; Mubarak-era Habib el-Adly was acquitted of all corruption charges in another embezzlement case known as the “license plates” case; Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Badie was sentenced to death, with possibility of appeal; a police officer was charged for the killing of protester Shaimaa el-Sabbagh; and finally, Egypt’s ruling declaring Hamas a terrorist organization was annulled. In response, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri welcomed the decision.

In regional and international affairs, there were seven main developments.

1. Russia began delivering Antey-2500 missile systems to Egypt;
2. Egypt opened its Rafah Crossing for Palestinians seeking to travel to Egypt and to pass aid to Gaza;
3. in the result of Egypt’s Universal Periodic Review at the UN, Egypt accepted 243 out 300 human rights recommendations;
4. Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia signed a Declaration of Principles on the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam;
5. 94.8 percent of the New Suez Canal drilling was completed, scheduling the inauguration of the project—which aims to increase international shipping—after approximately 14 weeks;
6. the Arab League Summit was held in Sharm el-Sheikh and concluded with the agreement in principle to create a joint Arab military force to address the divisive threats facing the Middle East; and
7. United States President Barack Obama released military aid of fighter jets, missiles, and tank kits to Egypt, a decision which was welcomed by President el-Sisi and perceived as a strategic move in support of the countries’ efforts in countering terrorism and extremism in Egypt.

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## ISRAEL-PALESTINE

BY MUHAMMED AMMASH

In the past month, a lawsuit in Egypt declaring Hamas a “terrorist” organization—due to accusations of the group’s support for insurgency in Sinai, was withdrawn at the end of the month. Meanwhile, the European Union kept Hamas on its terrorism blacklist in defiance of a court decision asking it to be removed from the register. The armed wing of the group al-Qassam Brigades declared that although they are not vigorously pursuing another round of violence with Israel, they have continued to stockpile rockets as a precaution for the future. In this context, Amnesty International published a report highlighting that Palestinian armed groups in Gaza endangered the lives and caused the death of civilians in Gaza during the war in the summer of 2014.



In Israel, the main topics occupying the agenda in March were the early Knesset elections<sup>1</sup> that were held in 17 March; PM Netanyahu’s speech to the US Congress before the elections; the strained relations with the Obama administration; and the Iran nuclear talks. Netanyahu’s pre-election remarks that maintained a stance against the formation of the Palestinian state, and in favor of maintaining the occupation, were condemned by US President Barack Obama, adding to the tension between the US and Israel that arose after Netanyahu’s visit to the US for delivering a speech at the Congress. Netanyahu’s Congress speech mainly addressed the fundamental cause of the strained alliance in US-Israel relations, namely, the Iran nuclear talks.

A leaked EU report published in the Guardian stated that Jerusalem has reached a hot point of “polarization and violence” not seen at any time since 1967, when Israel occupied Eastern Jerusalem, and it called for tough sanctions on Israel over its increasing settlement building. Moreover, in this context, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in its 28th session approved three resolutions regarding occupied Palestinian territories. The resolutions referred to the right of the Palestinians to live in an independent Palestine, confirmed their right to sovereignty over natural wealth and resources, and condemned Israel’s continued settlement activities<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the UN Commission on the Status of Women approved a resolution condemning Israel’s ongoing occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem for “the grave situation of Palestinian women.”

In the 26th Arab League Summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Palestinian President Abbas called on Arab states to unite and act on the Palestinian Question, which he described as worsening everyday.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information about Israeli election results, see GPoT Policy Update No. 9

<sup>2</sup> UNHRC Resolution (A/HRC/28/L.32), 25 March 2015

<sup>3</sup> For the main highlights and recommendations of the 26th Arab League Summit, see GPoT Policy Update No. 10

Similarly, in his letter to the Summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin, highlighted the need for establishing a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

As Palestine formally joins the International Criminal Court (ICC) on April 1st, it is an issue of concern whether it will pursue any legal actions against Israel in the upcoming period. Israel, on the other hand, released frozen tax revenue funds that it has been withholding since the Palestinian Authority decided to join the ICC. The UN Spokesperson, Stephane Dujarric, said that Secretary General Ban Ki-moon “urges both parties to exercise utmost restraint and reverse their unhelpful cycle of actions and counter-actions,” after several PLO officials’ proclamations to cut security coordination with Israel.

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