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# Regional Updates

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## CYPRUS

BY DUYGU ALPAN

The month of April was marked by the presidential elections held in the Turkish Cypriot side of the Green Line, and discussions over its possible impacts on peace deals on the island. The election results brought Cypriots hope for the reunification talks to recommence, since the Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and the newly elected Turkish Cypriot President Mustafa Akıncı agreed to meet shortly to move forward with the stalled peace negotiations.



The first round of the Turkish Cypriot presidential elections was held on April 19 with 62,35% voter turnout, and resulted in the incumbent President Derviş Eroğlu's and Mustafa Akıncı's progress to the second round; both are independent candidates. 64,12% of the Turkish Cypriot voters went to the ballot box for the run-off elections, which took place on April 26. The winner of the two-round election process was Mustafa Akıncı with 60,50% votes in favor. After taking office, Akıncı appointed the Turkish Cypriot Foreign Minister Özdil Nami as the chief negotiator for the peace negotiations.

The election campaign, which brought Mustafa Akıncı to the presidential office, featured promises towards a solution-oriented understanding on the negotiation table, and implementation of confidence-building measures (CBMs); including opening of the “ghost town” of Varosha for settlement under the auspices of the UN, and reconciliation over utilization of the Famagusta Port and Ercan Airport to overcome challenges on trade and tourism. Described as a leftist moderate, Akıncı has supported the search for a comprehensive solution in Cyprus during his earlier political career under different affiliations.

During a congratulatory phone conversation that followed the elections, the UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Cyprus, Espen Barth Eide, welcomed Akıncı for his commitment to resuming negotiations as soon as possible. Similarly, the Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, who congratulated Akıncı for his election victory, described this selection as a “hopeful development” for the rapid resumption of the peace deals. Furthermore, Anastasiades announced a series of confidence-building measures towards Turkish Cypriots in order to create an environment of mutual trust. According to a written statement, Anastasiades will hand over the ground maps of 28 minefields laid down by Greek Cypriots in the Pendadaktylos area before 1974 in his first meeting with Akıncı; transfer the management of certain Muslim religious sites in the Greek Cypriot side to Evkaf, the foundation that oversees Islamic land holdings; hire Turkish speaking personnel at the Citizen Service Centers in South Nicosia to carry out Turkish Cypriots' operations easier; and support the efforts undertaking football reunification on the island.

Earlier in April, Espen Barth Eide, who held separate meetings with leaders of both communities on the island, noted that he sees no obstacle to the resumption of talks once the Turkish Cypriots' election process is over. The statements of officials from both sides of the divided island throughout the month support prospects for an accelerated resumption of the official peace negotiations.

During a live interview, the newly elected President Mustafa Akıncı put forward his view regarding the relations between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot side saying that it should be a “sisterly relationship”, not a relationship of “a motherland and her child”. In response to these remarks, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who urged Akıncı to be aware of what he says, stated that Turkey’s view of the Turkish Cypriot side would not change, and Turkey “will continue to see them [Turkish Cypriots] the way a mother looks at her child”. Akıncı responded to Erdoğan that the Turkish Cyprus should mature, and relations should be on equal terms.

In the regional perspective, the leaders of Egypt, Greece and the Greek Cypriot side held a one-day trilateral summit on April 29 in South Nicosia, and released a joint declaration to further strengthen their cooperation in several fields including economy, counter-terrorism, and security. On the other hand, the Greek Cypriots passed a resolution, which criminalizes denial of the 1915 incidents as Armenian genocide under the Ottoman rule, prior to its 100th anniversary on 24 April 2015.

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## EGYPT

BY OMAR SHEIRA

April tensely began with a streak of separate attacks on military checkpoints in North Sinai, killing at least 31 military personnel and 4 civilians, and injuring over 44 police officers and 28 civilians. This was met with the reshuffling of top military officers and a series of counter-terrorism efforts, which resulted in the killing of at least 105 alleged terrorists, the arrest of 219 suspected terrorists, and the defusing of approximately 54 improvised explosive devices in North Sinai. Towards the end of the month, Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb authorized the continuation of the Buffer Zone expansion in new areas in Sinai's Rafah city, to deter militant-related activities.



In other parts of Egypt, bombings and armed attacks continued, predominantly in Fayoum, Cairo, Sharqia, Beheira, and Giza, targeting security forces, electricity, natural gas, telecom infrastructure, and transportation.<sup>1</sup> Notable attacks took place on churches in Alexandria and Fayoum, as well as the Egyptian Media Production City, where targeted electricity towers were severely damaged, causing a disruption in the broadcasting of some channels. In the context of Egypt's security, political, and economic struggles, President Abdelfattah el-Sisi said during a speech at Cairo's Police Academy that it will take two years to have Egypt "back on its feet".

In politico-legal developments, two consecutive dialogue sessions were conducted between PM Mehleb and political parties to address the unconstitutional electoral law and issue recommendations. The meetings — which were not inclusive of all political parties — ended inconclusively. Subsequently, on April 15, Egypt's cabinet approved amendments to the electoral laws, and thus, raised the number of parliamentarians to 597 members, the highest in Egyptian history. Following the approval of Egypt's State Council and Supreme Constitutional Court, a date will be set for the parliamentary elections, after the month of Ramadan.

There were also a number of developments in the judicial domain. Mubarak and his sons are set to receive a verdict in the Presidential Palace embezzlement case on May 9; former President Mohamed Morsi was sentenced to 20 years in prison for fomenting violence, with possibility of appeal; 14 Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leaders, including Mohamed Badie, were sentenced to death for instigating violence against the state, with possibility of appeal; Morsi's chief of staff was sentenced to three years in prison for abuse of power; 22 suspects were sentenced to life in prison and 5 to death over Kerdesa violence in 2013; 187 MB supporters were referred to a military court on charges of killing police officers in a 2013 attack; 71 suspects received life sentences for torching a church in Giza in 2013; 48 suspects were referred to a criminal court on charges of killing journalist Mayada Ashraf in 2014; and police officers were referred to court on charges of torturing a civilian to death.

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<sup>1</sup> See [GPoT Statistics: Security in Egypt for a brief quantitative report on April's terrorist attacks and counter-terrorist efforts in Egypt](#).

Finally, in regional and international affairs, there were eight main developments:

1. United States President Barack Obama lifted the weapons ban on Egypt, facilitating aid aimed at combating terrorism;
2. More than 1,460 Egyptians were evacuated from the violence-stricken Yemen with the help of Egyptian coordination with Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Oman;
3. Egypt joined the China-supported Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member with hopes of receiving finances for local developmental projects;
4. As the inauguration of the new waterway — scheduled within months — approaches, the dry digging of the new Suez Canal was completed;
5. Arab armies chief of staff met in Cairo to discuss the formation of the joint Arab military force; Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait deposited \$6 billion (\$2 billion each) with Egypt's central bank;
6. El-Sisi ratified a \$500 million World Bank loan to extend the connectivity of Egypt's natural gas grid;
7. Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry traveled to New York to campaign for Egypt's non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and speak on the role of youth in countering terrorism; and
8. Towards the end of the month, el-Sisi also held a summit with Cyprus and Greece on improving energy, economy, and investment cooperation; and met with Spain's King Felipe VI and signed agreements on illegal immigration, terrorism, and organized crime.

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## ISRAEL-PALESTINE

BY MUHAMMED AMMASH

Israel's High Court ruled against building the 'separation' wall in the Cremisan Valley area after a petition by local Palestinians in Beit Jala. Another rule by the Court this month was unfreezing the Anti-Boycott Law, which allows lawsuits and penalties against organizations, companies, and individuals who attempt to impose a boycott against Israel or its settlements in occupied lands. Moreover, the controversial Absentee Law<sup>1</sup> can now be used in East Jerusalem after judges' approval to do so. The law that was enacted in 1950 allows Israeli government to confiscate the property of the 'absentees' – Palestinians who were expelled from their homes.



More than a month after the general elections in Israel, the government is yet to be formed. Prime Minister Netanyahu received a two-week extension, ending in May 6, to form the next coalition. Although some progress was achieved as a result of his meetings with party leaders who could join the coalition, contrasting views remained on some laws which Netanyahu's Likud wants to advance in the new Knesset. The laws aim to restrict the Supreme Court's ability to annul bills by the Knesset, and change the make-up of the Judicial Selection Committee, in order to give the government more authority.

In foreign affairs, Russia has updated Israel on its decision to lift the ban on the sale of S-300 anti-missile systems to Iran, causing tension between the two countries. In this regard, Israel decided not to attend Russia's victory parade on May 9 to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Iran's Rouhani said that Iran's military is purely defensive and poses no threat to the Middle East. President Putin, on the other side, defended the deal as increasing security in light of Yemen, saying, "such arm supplies are a deterrent." On the emerging nuclear deal with Iran, PM Netanyahu sharply criticized negotiators and stated that they are "closing their eyes to [the] aggression" in Yemen.

Israel reportedly bombed arms warehouses in Libya, which allegedly stored weapons purchased by Iran for Hamas. Israel has not denied or confirmed any strikes in the region, but it denied reports claiming it was involved in airstrikes in the Syrian and Lebanese borders.

Meanwhile, 16 out of 28 European Foreign Ministers — including France and Britain — urged the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security to label West Bank settlement products. In their letter they said, "[...] We remain of the view that this is an important step in the full implementation of EU long-standing policy, in relation to the preservation of the two-state solution."

<sup>1</sup> See [Absentees' Property Law, 5710-1950](#)

Palestinian leader Abbas stated that they are ready to resume talks with Netanyahu without preconditions, and said that Palestinians recognize Israel, but not its Jewishness. He also warned that Islamic extremism would reach Israel if no deal was achieved.

Outside Israeli and Palestinian territories, Palestinians in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus are trapped in their homes, and face a severe humanitarian crisis after the Islamic State (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra forces took control of the region. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) issued an urgent request for humanitarian access to Yarmouk, saying the situation there was a “source of universal shame.” UNRWA has also indicated that they are unable to rebuild Gaza due to funding deficit, while a report by the *Sunday Telegraph* claimed that Iran has allocated millions of dollars to Hamas’ military wing for building and reconstructing tunnels in Gaza.

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