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Regional Updates

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CYPRUS

On 30 November, Boris Johnson, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, paid a visit to Cyprus to meet with the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders. After meeting with them, he said in a press statement “Cyprus is one of the few examples in the world of two leaders who are willing to show leadership...they are really reaching out for peace and I think that they are doing a great thing.” Anadolu Agency reported after the meeting that, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı touched upon the referendum timeframe emphasizing referendums may be held in mid-2017, while Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades said on social media that it was a pleasure to meet with Boris Johnson and that they discussed the Cyprus problem.



On 1 December the Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders decided to immediately re-engage in the reunification talks according to the United Nations statement published after the dinner held by Espen Barth Eide, Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Cyprus with two Cypriot leaders Mustafa Akıncı and Nicos Anastasiades. Accordingly, their negotiators were instructed to continue meeting in order to achieve further progress on all outstanding issues interdependently including the guarantee issue.

On 6 December, Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy met with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. The statement made after this meeting highlighted the importance of reaching a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem that would also contribute to security in the region and enhance EU-Turkey relations.

On 8 December, Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades gathered together with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras and Greek Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades gathered together for the second trilateral summit in Jerusalem in order to discuss the formation of a joint emergency and rescue force which envisages to deal with disasters such as fire, floods and earthquakes. After the meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a press release expressed that the assistance of Cyprus and Greece to Israel in November in putting out the fires was both invaluable and deeply appreciated.

On 9 December, upon meeting with Greek Cypriot Leader Anastasiades, French President François Hollande stated that the European Union(EU) leaders must also become engaged in the peace talks of Cyprus, while Greek Cypriot Leader Anastasiades emphasized that any peace deal must adhere to EU principles and laws.

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On 15 December, Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots marched side by side through the UN buffer zone in a rally to reunify Cyprus. They held placards that said ‘Yes to Solution’ while they chanted ‘Cyprus belongs to the people’.

On 21 December, Greek Cypriot Commerce, Industry and Tourism Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypis said that three oil and gas companies (Eni, Total, ExxonMobil) will negotiate to sort out the terms of licenses to drill for oil and gas off Cyprus. The companies will negotiate for one block each, and the licenses are envisaged to be valid for seven years. The talks are expected to conclude by the end of January or early February 2017.

At the end of December, the Cypriot leaders were getting prepared for the five-party summit that will be held from 9 January to 12 January 2017 in Geneva. Representatives of both sides of Cyprus, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom will participate in the summit to overcome a major concern; the security issue and discuss a number of other issues regarding the reunification.

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EGYPT

On 4 December Egypt's air and naval forces departed for Greece to participate in joint Egyptian and Greek military drills. The exercise named "Medusa 2016" included several activities that required planning and administering of joint naval operations alongside the operation of 'day and night' sailing formations, maritime interceptions and inspecting of suspicious ships. Search and rescue procedures were also conducted according to Ahram.



On 6 December, the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt upheld a law banning protests. The law was passed in 2013 as a response to demonstrations calling for the reinstatement of former Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Mursi, after the military overthrew him pursuant to mass protests against his rule. The new law stipulates that would-be protesters are to notify the Interior Ministry of any public gathering of more than 10 people at least 3 days in advance.

On 8 December, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon indicated his concern over the arrests of prominent Egyptian human rights lawyer, Azza Soliman. He warned that Egyptian authorities are progressively shutting down freedom of expression. Azza founded the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance. She was questioned and detained briefly for allegedly taking foreign funds to "harm national interests" according her lawyer in the New Arab.

On 11 December, 72 people were killed and injured respectively after an explosion inside a church attached to the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo. A subsequent explosion in Abbassya district targeting Coptic Christians added to the casualties. This has been one of the deadliest attacks on Egyptian Christians in years.

On 27 December, Egypt's President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ratified a new media law. According to critics this is a blow to pluralism and press freedom in Egypt as the law introduces a Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media. The new body can revoke licenses to foreign media and fine or suspend publications and broadcasters according to Al Jazeera.

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LIBYA

On 1 December, UN envoy Martin Kobler appealed for calm following two days of escalated fighting in Tripoli. Intensive fighting broke out in Tripoli in what appears to have been pre-emptive strikes by militias allegedly linked to the Presidency Council to obliterate militants linked to grand mufti Sadek Al-Ghariani, former Tripoli prime minister, Khalifa Ghwell and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).



On migration, Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino in his report to the EU warned that migrant smuggling, originated far beyond Libyan borders and remains a major source of income among locals in Libyan coastal cities. He indicated that coastal cities were making up to 325 million euros in revenue each year from people smuggling. Enrico is the commander of the EU military task force in the Mediterranean Sea.

On 5 December, forces loyal to Libya's government, the Presidency Council indicated that the battle for Sirte was over. They claimed they had driven Islamic State militants from the last neighborhood they held in Sirte. "Our forces have total control of Sirte", Reda Issa, a spokesman for pro-government forces said to AFP.

Meanwhile, General Khalifa Haftar, chief of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and his forces have taken control over two of the four export terminals in the Oil Crescent. On the other hand the Benghazi Defense Forces who had been expelled from the eastern city of Benghazi were reported to be advancing toward Libya's vital oil terminals. They are seeking to take control over Libya's primary revenue source according to the Associated Press. They launched an assault over three eastern towns including al-Sidra terminal according to Tarek al-Jaroushi who is the head of the national security committee in Libya's internationally recognized parliament.

On 18 December, head of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) Fayez al-Sarraj announced that the city of Sirte was no more the Libyan stronghold of the Islamic State organization. He however reiterated that the war against terrorism had not finished.

On 20 December, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that 18,722 migrants had been rescued in maritime incidents off the western Libyan coastline in 2016. The UN added that 5,000 migrants had died while trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2016 indicating a record high.

Towards the end of December, Egypt's president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi met with the Libyan parliamentary speaker, Aguila Saleh Issa. Al-Sisi indicated that he supported the sovereignty of

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Libya. He further added his belief in the maintenance of unity and integration of its territories according to a presidential statement cited in the Libya Herald.

SYRIA

In-country Conflict Updates

On 1 December as the battle for Aleppo continued rebel factions indicated they would join forces together. According to Reuters, such a coalition force was set to be called the “Aleppo Army” and would be led by Abu Adelrahman Nour, a Jabhat al-Shamiyya commander.

On 6 December, forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad entered the Shaar neighborhood after regaining control of nearly two-thirds of eastern Aleppo. Subsequently, rebels called for a ceasefire and evacuation of civilians. A document signed by the Aleppo Leadership Council called for negotiations and the evacuation of civilians and some 500 medical cases.

The Syrian government however, rejected rebel calls for a ceasefire and rather indicated that, taking Aleppo was a huge step. Assad said, “It is true that Aleppo will be a win for us, but let’s be realistic, it will not mean the end of the war in Syria.” Assad, nonetheless criticized neighboring Lebanon’s policy of dissociating itself from regional conflicts according to the Daily Star.

On 9 December, Russia announced that the Syrian government’s offensive in Aleppo will be suspended. This paved way for the evacuation of over 8000 people trapped in the conflict, Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister said.

On the other hand, Turkish military operation advanced towards al-Bab targeting Islamic state militants. This notwithstanding, over 4000 Islamic State militants have forced Syrian government troops out of the ancient city of Palmyra and retaken hold of same.

On 13 December, the Syrian government and allied forces closed in on rebels in Aleppo. “The battle in eastern Aleppo should end quickly. They (rebels) don’t have much time. They either have to surrender or die,” said Lieutenant General Zaid al-Saleh, head of the government’s Aleppo security committee. Pursuant to this, the Syrian government on 24 December officially announced its complete control of Aleppo.

Meanwhile on 15 December, opposition-held areas across Syria witnessed demonstrations in solidarity with Aleppo. Protestors demanded an end to killings in Aleppo while condemning the positions of both the UN Security Council and the international community on the Syrian Conflict. Some demonstrations also called for a unification of rebel fronts, while others demanded an overthrow of hardline Islamist armed opposition groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaida’s affiliate in Syria.



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Outside of Syria, the UN humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien has lamented that, "there are no limits or red lines left to cross". He told the UN Security Council that, "the rules of war- sacrosanct notions borne out of generations of costly and painful lessons and set more than 150 years ago in the First Geneva Convention have been systematically disregarded in Syria".

On 23 December, the UN General Assembly adopted a Liechtenstein-drafted resolution to investigate potential war crimes and human rights violations since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

In other developments, the US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter indicated that, his country will send 200 military personnel including special forces to join the 300 special forces already in Syria.

On Ceasefire and Peace Talks

On 6 December, Russia and China blocked a UN Security Council draft resolution calling for a seven-day humanitarian truce in Aleppo.

On 21 December, UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said talks between the Syrian government and the Riyadh-backed opposition will resume early next year after negotiations reached an impasse earlier in April. The latest round of Geneva talks reached a deadlock on April 27 and was limited to meetings between the Syrian government's delegation and the UN special envoy due to the opposition delegation's negative stance that suspended its participation.

Also, Turkish foreign affairs minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, both with divergent positions in the conflict spoke at a joint-press conference in the Turkish coastal town of Alanya following a meeting to discuss the Syrian situation. They indicated a ceasefire deal was needed to address the situation.

In a similar event in Beirut, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called for a cease-fire in Syria. He was speaking at a press conference with his Lebanese counterpart Gebran Bassil, the latter reaffirmed Turkey's position that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad should be removed from power.

However, pursuant to a tripartite meeting among Iran, Turkey and Russia, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stressed that, there is the need to respect Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. He indicated that a political solution is the only way out of the crisis. He clarified that Iran, Russia and Turkey are seeking to pave the way for a cessation of hostilities, delivering humanitarian assistance and starting political talks among the Syrian parties.

In related developments, Turkey said it would work with the Syrian government and opposition forces to facilitate communications ahead of peace talks scheduled to take place in Kazakhstan, according to Bloomberg.

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On 28 December, per the Anadolu Agency, Turkey and Russia agreed on a proposal for general ceasefire in Syria, the ceasefire agreement has since taken effect.

Meanwhile, Russia and the US have both accused each other of stalling on Aleppo Talks. Mark Toner, US State Department Secretary opines that there is a moderate Syrian opposition that should not be bombed into submission. On the contrary, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov said serious discussions with the US does not seem to be making any progress.

Rebel Groups Uniting?

On December 22, major rebel factions launched a project to unite after the fall of Aleppo. The merger was to include all factions fighting in northern Syria. The first merger was in Badaya. It projected the merging of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Nusra Front), the Nouredin al-Zinki Movemnet, the Turkistani Islamic Party, Jabhat Ansr al-Din, Ajnad al-Sham and Liwa al-Haqq. The Ahrar al-Sham movement is also holding talks with other revolutionary to reach a deal to also merge.

On Evacuations

On 2 December, the evacuation of Al-Taal city in the northern Damascus suburbs began. Evacuations from eastern Aleppo were also ongoing according to the BBC. However, on 14 December, there were delays in evacuation planned by Turkey and Russia as Syrian government took control of Aleppo. The cease-fire that led to subsequent evacuations was negotiated by Russia and Turkey. Civilians were set to be evacuated first followed by rebels, Turkish foreign ministry spokesman Hüseyin Müftüoğlu said. Turkish deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek added that, Turkey was planning a new tent city to house 80,000 people fleeing eastern Aleppo. Rebel officials however, reiterated that irrespective of the delay, the cease-fire remained in place

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GPoT Center serves as a platform for the free exchange of views and information on political, social and economic matters concerning a variety of parties and segments of society. We aim to achieve our mission by routinely bringing together opinion leaders, government officials, policy makers, analysts, scholars, experts and members of the media from Turkey and abroad.

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