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# Regional Updates

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## REGIONAL UPDATES: CYPRUS

### CYPRUS

During the 21<sup>st</sup> month of the negotiation process for Cyprus, tension between the two parts arose again over a law that will allow the celebration of the 1950 referendum (Enosis) in public schools, in which 96 percent of Greek Cypriots voted for the island to be united with Greece. Enosis, even as a word, has been controversial for both sides.



The Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı said “It is pointless and unacceptable that the Greek Cypriot Leader Nicos Anastasiades described this annual commemoration as a ‘simple reference to the historical facts’ and considered this as equivalent to the Cyprus Peace Operation on 20 July and the anniversary events of TRNC on 15 November”.

Turkish Cypriot Leader, Akıncı held a telephone conversation with UN Secretary General’s Special Adviser on Cyprus Espen Barth Eide. He requested him to take an initiative not to sign the decision of the Greek parliament. He indicated that, this would be against the aim of reaching a federal Cyprus.

On 15 February, in a statement by Turkish Cypriot Leader Akıncı, Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades walked out of negotiations soon after a controversial new law on Enosis Plebiscite was brought up. Two-weeks after the alleged incident, the Turkish side refused to attend the meeting that was held in the buffer zone on 23 February. Even though Anastasiades claimed that, the Turkish side overreacted to this issue, Akıncı stated that they would be back at the table the day after the Republic’s parliament corrected its Enosis decision.

On the other hand, a Turkish journalist Metin Münir, who has been following the developments in Cyprus for a lengthy period, theorized a different perspective by saying “if a plebiscite was held today for unification with Greece, the result would be shameful for Enosis supporters because not more than 10 percent will probably vote for yes.”

Within the second week of February, British Defense Minister Michael Fallon paid an official visit to Cyprus upon the invitation of Greek Cypriot Defense Minister, Christoforos Fokaides. During the visit, Fallon indicated that the British military base in Cyprus had become more significant than ever with the increase in terrorist extremism and mass migration. They subsequently signed a bilateral military cooperation agreement.

Subsequently, a bilateral meeting was held between Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım and UN Secretary-General António Guterres in Istanbul on the Cyprus question. The leading role, Guterres said, belongs to the island’s two communities and the guarantor powers. He added that the UN will play a supportive role in order to enhance and assist the conditions for a successful result. “We believe that it is possible to find solutions to the range of issues that are still pending and the guarantor powers to support the search for a solution that is acceptable to everyone,” Guterres said.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: EGYPT

### EGYPT

On 3 February, Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said his country is keen to increase coordination with the new US administration. He said this when he met a delegation from the Middle East Institute according to Ahram.



On 4 February, South Sudan rebels accused Egypt of carrying out bombing raids against their positions. This drew an immediate denial from Cairo, and warned of the risk of a regional war. It was the first time either side had alleged Egyptian involvement in South Sudan's conflict, which pits President Salva Kiir's military against forces loyal to his former vice president, Riek Machar.

On 4 February, Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court determined that, Coptic Christian civil servants have the right to leave of absence with pay as Muslim civil servants have for one month to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

On 6 February, Egypt's army killed 14 terrorists and arrested 13 others in northern Sinai, during an operation in the Sinai peninsula to expel terrorists. Army spokesman Tamer al-Refaei announced that, the army discovered 6 stores of terrorists where 4 tons of explosive chemical materials were found and subsequently destroyed.

The Egyptian Army announced, that 500 terrorists killed since the army started a wide operation in the Sinai in September 2015. Furthermore in previous days the state of emergency in North Sinai extended to April 2017.

On 21 February, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and King Abdullah II of Jordan agreed that, there could be no concessions on establishing a Palestinian state, the leaders said this after talks in Cairo according to the Kuwait News Agency.

On 27 February, An Egyptian MP started a campaign to lift restrictions on presidential re-election. The motion for an amendment of Article 140 of the Egyptian Constitution would enable Al-Sisi to stay in office longer.

With regards to developments in northern Sinai, the Coptic Church in Egypt said that dozens of Christian families living in the region had been forced to flee their homes due to Salafi radicals' violence against Christians.

## REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

### ISRAEL-PALESTINE

On 1 February, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Liberman approved the construction of 4000 new settlement housing units. Subsequently, Israeli forces began evacuating the West Bank outpost.



On 6 February, Netanyahu met with Prime Minister of UK Theresa May in London. Prior to the meeting, Netanyahu claimed that the new US and British administrations meant new diplomatic opportunities for Israel. In their first bilateral meeting the leaders discussed a wide range of topics from free trade and post-Brexit agreement opportunities to security and defense. Netanyahu encouraged May saying “responsible” nations should impose new sanctions on Iran, and should follow US President Donald Trump’s lead by punishing Iran for testing long range missiles.

The Israeli Parliament has approved a Law on the Regulation of Settlement in Judea and Samaria, thus legalizing settlements that are built in West Bank. On this issue Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’ Spokesman said “this is an escalation that would only lead to more instability and chaos. It is unacceptable. It is denounced and the international community should act immediately.”

On 7 February, Abbas met with French President Francois Hollande where they discussed efforts to safeguard a two-state solution and the prevention of settlement expansion. Hollande urged Israel to reconsider its newly approved law on the settlements in West Bank.

On 15 February, Netanyahu was hosted by US President Donald Trump at the White House. This was the first time after the latter became the president of the United States. Trump remarked a change in US Middle East Policy, by suggesting consideration to a solution that suits both parties. On the possibility of a one-state solution, Trump said he would back a single-state solution if it satisfies the two sides.

Trump also indicated the possibility of moving the US Embassy in Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem whilst urging Netanyahu to pull back on the settlements in the West Bank for a while.

Mahmoud Abbas on the other hand welcomed Trump’s pronouncement for Netanyahu to pull back on the settlements whilst stating his commitment to a two-state solution and his readiness to work with the Trump administration to make it happen.

On 16 February, UN Security Council discussed the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. The Secretary-General’s Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nikolay Mladenov urged both Israeli and Palestinian sides to contemplate carefully the future they envisioned for their respective peoples.

Also, Nikolay Mladenov, indicated that the Israeli Parliament should reconsider its new legislation on the settlements. "If adopted into law, it will have far-reaching legal consequences for Israel and

## REGIONAL UPDATES: ISRAEL-PALESTINE

greatly diminish the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace,” he said. In his briefing to the Security Council, Mladenov insisted the two-state solution remains “the only way” to meet the national aspirations of both peoples.

Subsequently, the US Ambassador to United Nations Nikki Haley claimed that the Trump administration “absolutely” supports the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On 24 February, Human Rights Watch announced that, their Israel and Palestine Director Omar Shakirs’ work permit has been rejected on 20 February by Israel. The Israeli Foreign Ministry Spokesman claimed that “the organization is not a real human rights group” and “fundamentally biased”.

On 27 February , The 34th session of the UN Human Rights Council started and will continue till 24th March. In the first day of the session, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas spoke in the Council. He requested a safeguard to the two-state solution. Abbas expressed that formal recognition of Palestine by all nations was the best way to protect the two-state solution. He further recalled the Security Council’s Resolution 2334 against the settlement activity and asked the UN to immediately implement it. If Israel withdraws from West Bank and East Jerusalem “this will lead to an independent Palestinian state on pre-June 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Permanent Representative of Israel to the UN Danny Danon criticized the UN Human Rights Council after Abbas’ speech. He said “it was no surprise that this Council, which has long been divorced from reality, has chosen once again to provide a platform for Palestinian smears against us”

## REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA

### LIBYA

A major highlight in the month of February was the announcement of the EU-Libya deal on Migrants. European Council President Donald Tusk indicated that, Europe would pay to train and equip the Libyan Coastguard to stop people smugglers while the number of search and rescue operations will also be increased. He added that, additional funds would be given to local communities in Libya to “improve their situation and help shelter stranded migrants”.



The deal will see the European Union give \$215 million to Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) towards the cause. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the approach was tried and tested.

Meanwhile, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, which has embarked on several rescue missions on the Mediterranean said EU's new Libya deal will only make matters worse for migrants.

Libya Prime Minister, Fayeaz al-Serraj, has indicated that, NATO or EU ships could be permitted to operate in Libyan waters alongside the national military coastguard to slow the flow of people-smuggling across the Mediterranean. “If there is something to be carried out jointly between the Libyan Navy and any other party interested in extending a hand to the Libyan Navy, that would be possible,” he said, according to The Guardian.

On 5 February, violent clashes erupted at the western entrance of the capital, Tripoli, between armed groups called Fursan Janzour Brigade, which is positioned in Janzour some kilometers west of Tripoli, and armed forces from the Wershefana district to the west of Tripoli according to the Libya Express.

On 16 February, NATO confirmed the receipt of an official request from Libya's UN-backed government asking the group to help train the country's armed forces. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told a news conference, that his outfit had started looking into what kind of support they could offer Libya.

Fayeaz Al-Sarraj, and rival Army Chief Marshal Khalifa Haftar were in Cairo for talks mediated by the Egyptian Army. They agreed to set up a “joint committee” to formulate amendments to the deal (Libya Political Agreement) that set up the unity government, the Egyptian military said.

On 17 February, the UK Defense Secretary Sir Michael Fallon warned Russia against interfering in Libya, as Britain and its NATO allies consider sending more aid to help the country rebuild its armed forces. He indicated at the Munich Security Conference that, Russia was “testing” the military alliance with overtures to General Khalifa Haftar who is in competition with the UN-backed government.

## **REGIONAL UPDATES: LIBYA**

On 28 February, UNICEF’s “A Deadly Journey for Children Report” indicated that, refugee children and women routinely suffered sexual violence, exploitation, abuse and detention along the Central Mediterranean migration route. UNICEF mentioned that a total of 25,846 children, most of them unaccompanied crossed from North Africa to Italy via the Mediterranean route in 2016.



### SYRIA

#### Geneva Peace Talks

The main highlight of the month of February with regards to Syrian Conflict development was the Geneva Peace Talks. After an initial postponement of the 20<sup>th</sup> February date, the talks took off on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February.



The UN-backed talks were postponed when the opposition delegation threatened to boycott the opening ceremony due to misunderstandings over the session format. They however, participated as one bloc. In his speech the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura said that, “I ask you to work together. I know it’s not going to be easy to end this horrible conflict and lay the foundation for a country at peace with itself, sovereign and unified”.

This is the fourth round of negotiations and peace talks in Geneva since the Syrian Conflict, however, this is the first time the opposing sides in Syria have participated face-to-face in the UN-backed talks in three years.

The opposition delegation includes the rebel representative High Negotiations Committee (HNC) backed by Saudi Arabia. The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) was also present.

According to the UN News Centre, the ISSG established various taskforces on humanitarian aid delivery and a wider ceasefire. They have also met separately since early 2016 on a way forward in the Syrian conflict. Russia and the US are the co-chairs of the taskforces. The UN, Arab League, the European Union and 16 other countries are all members of the ISSG.

De Mistura further added at the talks that, “it is your opportunity and solemn responsibility...not to condemn future generations of Syrian children to long years of bitter and bloody conflict”.

On his part the UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, after six years of bloodshed, he believes the only way to resolve the conflict and bring lasting peace to Syria is through a political solution. He encouraged all Syrians who have committed themselves to this goal to redouble their efforts for peace.

De Mistura in his role as mediator is pushing for a resolution of the conflict based on the [UN Security Council Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#) that endorsed a roadmap for peace process in Syria including specific language on governance, constitution elections and how negotiations should be timed.

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