

**In Brief:** Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet has resulted in dramatic changes between those two states. But while it was an extraordinary development, both countries had already been heading in different and opposing directions in foreign policy. The Arab Uprisings created critical problems that made the regional setting unworkable for Turkish-Russian rapprochement. Since the first day of the Syrian crisis, Ankara's key strategic priority has been to keep the Kurds from becoming an autonomous political body in Syria. Russia, meanwhile, has created a de facto safe zone for the Kurdish groups against Turkish air operations and rapidly become an important stakeholder in Kurdish politics. Turkey and Russia are now in a proxy war in Syria that has cemented Turkey's return to the NATO camp.

## Turkey and Russia's Proxy War and the Kurds

by Gökhan Bacık

### The Perfect Pretext

Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet has resulted in dramatic changes between those two states. But while it was an extraordinary development, the paradigmatic shift between Turkey and Russia is not a result of this incident. Both countries had already been heading in different and opposing directions in foreign policy; the jet affair has only triggered both states' embrace of bellicose positions on regional politics.

In an August 2012 analysis for the German Marshall Fund, I asked "Will Turkey be able to sustain its positive strategy toward Russia after the Arab Spring? Can the Arab Spring cause irreparable damage to Turkish-Russian relations?" I also wrote that "the regional matrix that Turkey envisions nurtures certain risks in terms of relations with Russia. Turkey's strategies potentially put Russian geopolitical interests in the Middle East at risk. Although not intending to target Russia directly, Ankara's policies have a general tendency to weaken Russia's strategic interests."

My prediction was that if not healed even a little, the rifts that would appear during the Arab Spring could easily grow so far as to include bilateral economic relations between Turkey and Russia.<sup>1</sup> Recent years

1 "Turkey and Russia in the Arab Spring: Straining Old Rifts Further?", *On Turkey*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, August 16, 2012, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-and-russia-arab-spring-straining-old-rifts-further>

have proved that Turkey and Russia can no longer harmonize their foreign policies. Since both states had already started giving early signals of mutual strategic unhappiness, the jet incident has created the perfect pretext to declare their hostile positions.

One point must be clearly underlined: Today, Russia and Turkey are not only following different paths in regional politics, but their policies are mutually detrimental. Metaphorically, Pareto efficiency is observed, particularly in the Middle East, between both states where it is impossible to make one state better off without making the other worse off. These conflicting strategies of Russia and Turkey are particularly visible in Syria, where the dynamics of confrontation has almost generated a proxy war between the two states. And a third group, the Kurds, is becoming a critical actor, a typical component of a proxy war.

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Turkey and Russia have tried a special model of relations in the post-Cold War era that is called an “economy-first” paradigm. In light of the fact that they were part of rival ideological camps in the Cold War, the economy-first paradigm was a perfect strategy. After all, the two countries had nothing in common regarding culture and politics. This paradigm performed well despite certain comparatively auxiliary crises like the Russian intervention in Georgia. However, the success of the economy-first paradigm requires one condition: There must be no high-level crisis that raises the issue of the ideological and political differences between the two countries.

The Arab Uprisings created critical problems that made the regional setting unworkable for Turkish-Russian rapprochement. These problems have forced both countries to embrace opposing paths, the only strategy for each state to defend its interests in the Middle Eastern context. Therefore, the structural problems between Turkey and Russia are likely to continue for a comparatively long period and will generate long-term critical outcomes.

### The Front of the Proxy War: Syria

Current Middle Eastern chaos is the product of a set of serious problems, and each state has its peculiar strategic priorities. Even the harmonization of interests among friendly states is nearly impossible. Since the first day of the Syrian crisis, Ankara’s key strategic priority has been to deal with the Kurdish issue lest it be transformed into a new detrimental status quo. The equation is clear: Turkey does not want the Kurds to become an independent or autonomous political body in Syria. However, the events that have unfolded during the Syrian crisis have created unprecedented opportunities for the Kurdish movement. They have received global public appreciation for fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS). They have also initiated contact with global powers. Kurdish groups like the Democratic Union Party (PYD) have geopolitical assets that they can market. They have manpower, a social basis, and political and military experience. And they are the only secular political groups in the middle of religious radicalism.

After the downing of the jet, Russia increased its support to Kurdish groups in Syria and deployed its cutting-edge S-400 air defense system to the Syrian base in Khmeimim. This created a de facto safe zone for the Kurdish groups against Turkish air operations. Russia has rapidly become an important stakeholder in Kurdish politics. Kurdish leaders like Salih Muslim (PYD) visited Moscow. Even more dramatically, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the Turkey’s Kurdish HDP, visited Moscow shortly after the jet was brought

down. Russia has become the pivotal power in Syria, a worrisome development for Turkey. Ankara has warned Russia about helping terrorist groups like the PYD. Ironically, some of Turkey's allies, like the United States and Germany, are also in contact with Kurds. But supported by Russia, the Kurdish-People's Protection Units (YPG) forces have attained important gains. Turkey's main fear is the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish zone, similar to the one in Iraq. Kurdish groups want to establish such a zone by connecting the Kobane and Afrin cantons, creating a long, contiguous zone bordering Turkey.

Russia will keep playing the Kurdish card for two major reasons: Having the Kurds as key partners against radical groups, and confronting and punishing Turkey. Like many other states, Kurds are also a potential partner for Russia. The global public has failed to notice how Russia is alarmed by the expansion of ISIS. Fighting radicalism has been a key item on Russia's strategic agenda in the post-Cold War period. Russia is extremely concerned about the radical threat not only in the Caucasus but also in its vast neighborhood as far as Kazakhstan. Unlike the United States, problems caused by the Syrian crisis are considered a direct threat by countries like Iran and Russia. Therefore Russia will continue to influence the Kurdish groups according to its strategic priorities. Russia will also be happy to influence the Kurdish issue in a way that puts Turkey on the spot. For Turkey, the worst-case scenario in this vein is Russia's support to various Kurdish groups in consolidating their region alongside the Turkish border.

The gist of the problem for Turkey is clear: Russia's role in Syria can paralyze Turkey's capacity to be a key actor in that country, and this is not limited to Kurdish issues. It is notable that especially after the jet affair, Moscow updated its strategies with an aim of undoing Turkey's strategic acquisitions in Syria. Since December 2015, Russia has intensified its air bombing of many ground targets, which created two major costs for Turkey. First, Russia weakened pro-Turkish groups.

Groups like Jaish al-Fateh that started controlling various strategic parts of the Aleppo-Latakia corridor have become the target of Russian attacks. Many groups close to Turkey have lost serious strategic positions after these attacks. Second, Russian air strikes concentrated on places like Idlib, Homs, and parts of Hamah is part of a strategy that shores up the Bashar al-Assad regime, another grave cost for Ankara.

### Conclusion

Turkish and Russian strategic interests collided, for instance, during the crises in Ukraine and Georgia. However, no previous crisis has risen to the level of a proxy war as in Syria. The Syrian equation is clear: Both states need to damage each other strategies in

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order to realize their own goals. Meanwhile, facing threats, Turkey has turned back to the West. Recent developments have again proved that NATO membership determines Turkey's main international characteristics. In an earlier piece written for the *On Turkey* series, Ian lesser argued that "Relations with Turkey are set to become the most critical in the Alliance — the 21st century equivalent of the inner German border of the Cold War years."<sup>2</sup> Such a strategic position would make Turkey a direct front for potential strategic risks coming from the Middle East and, particularly, Russia. Turkey is not completely immune from the problems in its neighborhood, so transforming Ankara into a Western strategic front could easily become corrosive. Turkey's return to the NATO

<sup>2</sup> Ian lesser, "In the Eye of the Storm: Turkey and the New Security Equation," *On Turkey*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, December 7, 2015, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/eye-storm-turkey-and-new-security-equation>

camp is still a raw reality that must be processed by a sophisticated foreign-policy mechanism. A strategic partnership with the West based on simple mutual security needs is likely to be detrimental for Turkey in the long term. Worse, it is not clear how this may happen, as many of Turkey's allies have already taken different positions. Ankara criticizes Moscow for aiding the YPG, but well before these events, Asya Abdullah, the commander of the YPG's female forces, was received by the French president in Elyse. Therefore, it is very doubtful that the Turkish strategic service to the West will be answered equally.

Turkey and Russia are in a proxy war in Syria that has cemented Turkey's return to the NATO camp. However, it is yet to be seen how this camp can satisfy Turkey's security interests in a highly combustible region.

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#### **About the Author**

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