



# The Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations

By Soli Özel     May 10, 2016

On November 24, 2015, despite multiple warnings from Turkish air patrols, a Russian SU-24 aircraft that violated Turkish airspace for 17 seconds was shot down by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet. The Russians denied that they were ever in Turkish airspace, while NATO corroborated the Turkish version.<sup>1</sup> According to Turkish sources, there were repeated warnings for five minutes—which the Russians claimed they never received—and Turkey’s rules of engagement were well known to the Russians.<sup>2</sup> One pilot was rescued by Russian special forces, but Turkmen rebels—trained and supplied by Turkey—on the ground across the border in Syria shot and killed the other as he was parachuting from the plane.<sup>\*3</sup>

Turkish authorities immediately approached NATO for support, a move that reportedly infuriated Russian President Vladimir Putin, who called the downing of the plane “a stab in the back.”<sup>4</sup> The Russian military claimed that the Turkish action was preplanned—an accusation the Turkish General Staff denied.<sup>5</sup> After initially reiterating that its rules of engagement were clear, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed sadness at the downing of the plane and his hope that the crisis could be resolved.<sup>6</sup>

From the measures the Russians immediately took, it seems that Moscow was ready for such an incident. The Russian government imposed economic sanctions that hit the Turkish trade, construction, and tourism sectors, exchanges that had benefited Turkey immensely.<sup>7</sup> Militarily, Russia announced that it would deploy its more advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles in Syria and continued to pound the positions of the Turkmen brigades that Turkey organized, trained, supplied with arms and money, and supports fully in their fight against the Assad regime.<sup>8</sup> Effectively, the Russian air force obliterated these brigades both as part of Moscow’s campaign to weaken the so-called moderate rebels in Syria and also to hit back at Turkey for the shoot down.

But Moscow did not take any steps to reduce the amount of gas it supplies to Turkey nor did it use Turkey’s dependence on Russia for 55 percent of its gas consumption as a threat.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Russia insisted that Turkey take responsibility for the shoot down, apologize, and pay indemnities—demands similar to those Turkey put to the Israeli government after the Mavi Marmara tragedy. The cost of these sanctions to Turkey is estimated to exceed \$8 billion in 2016.<sup>10</sup>

The Turkish side did not have any retaliatory measures at hand for Russia. Turkish officials simply repeated their regret that the incident took place and hope that tensions could be resolved and relations would improve.<sup>11</sup> To avoid provoking any direct Russian military retaliation, Turkey was careful not to fly too close to the Syrian border, and reported violations of Turkish airspace by Russian aircraft were ignored until January 30. President Erdoğan, whose attempts to have an audience with Putin have been repeatedly turned down, reacted angrily to the continuing violations, saying, “If Russia continues the violations of Turkish sovereign rights, it will be forced to endure the consequences.”<sup>12</sup> What these consequences might entail was not explained.

The effects of the November incident almost completely cut Turkey out of the Syrian theater. This has left Turkey with limited means to affect developments across the border that it deems threatening to its core national interests, such as the territorial expansion of the Democratic Union Party, or PYD—the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which has waged war against the Turkish state for the past 32 years.

More importantly, Russia and Turkey’s close relations, built since 2000, have been severely harmed. This may be an irreversible development, particularly in view of Russia’s strategic moves in Syria and elsewhere. The days when President Erdoğan asked President Putin to let Turkey be a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are gone.<sup>13</sup> The reaction of the Turkish government after the shoot down incident demonstrated that Ankara has finally realized that the country’s traditional NATO allies are all that is left to rely on for Turkey’s security, despite profound differences concerning the nature of the PYD and its role in Syria.

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## From historic enemy to strategic partner

Historically, the Russian Empire often expanded at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, and the relations between Russia and Turkey are often framed by the number of wars they and their predecessor states fought. But there have been periods of cooperation and mutual reliance as well, most notably during the Russian civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution, which coincided with the Turkish War of Independence.<sup>14</sup> The two sides helped one another and relations were smooth until the end of World War II when Joseph Stalin made territorial claims on Turkey and demanded joint control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits; it was this threat that pushed Turkey toward the American side and NATO membership during the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

Economic relations improved beginning in the early 1960s, and the 1984 signing of a swap agreement of Russian gas for Turkish products initiated a period of tightening economic links.<sup>16</sup> In the 1990s, the two sides continued to have good relations economically despite stark political disagreements; elements in Turkey supported the Chechen rebellion against Moscow,<sup>17</sup> while the Russians supported the PKK in its struggle against the Turkish state.<sup>18</sup> There was also competition for influence over the newly independent Central Asian Turkic republics, as well as strategic competition in the Caucasus. By the

end of the decade, the two sides had decided to lower tensions, cooperate, and refrain from military competition in the Black Sea. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov's visit to Turkey in October 2000<sup>19</sup> inaugurated a new era of close cooperation that would lead to a hesitant—and perhaps untenable—strategic partnership.

In Turkey, some security elites favored distancing the country from the European Union without alienating the United States and looked to cooperation with Russia and Iran.<sup>20</sup> This outlook was at least partly informed by Turkey's desire to become an energy hub. Within 10 years, trade between the two countries increased sevenfold; Turkey became Russia's sixth-largest trading partner, and Russia became Turkey's second-largest trading partner.<sup>21</sup> The energy cooperation that began in the 1980s deepened with the 1997 Blue Stream project,<sup>22</sup> which brings Russian gas under the Black Sea to Turkey, and culminated in 2010 when Turkey awarded a contract to build a nuclear reactor to Russia.<sup>23</sup>

As energy cooperation increased, Turkish contractors prospered in Russia, and visa restrictions were lifted.<sup>24</sup> Relations reached the level of a strategic partnership at the first meeting of the High-Level Cooperation Council, an intergovernmental cooperation mechanism that lays the foundation for the partnership between the two countries. The meeting was held in 2010 despite tensions between Russia and the West following Moscow's 2008 invasion of Georgia, which drew harsh condemnation from the United States and NATO.<sup>25</sup> Turkey largely looked past the Russian invasion in favor of energy and economic cooperation with Moscow. During this period, Turkey also became the first NATO member to buy weapons from the Russian Federation.<sup>26</sup>

The intensification of economic relations took place mainly under Justice and Development Party, or AKP, governments in Turkey. The leaders of the two countries met frequently, often signing lucrative deals on energy and other industries.<sup>27</sup> But this was not an equal relationship. Turkey became increasingly dependent on Russian gas, and as overall bilateral trade expanded beyond \$30 billion, Turkey's trade deficit with Russia neared \$20 billion annually.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the award of the contract for the construction of the nuclear reactor to Russia seems all the more curious because it increases Russia's energy stranglehold on Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey provides Russia with a reliable and expanding market for its gas.

Moreover, Moscow has often opposed Turkey on matters of political and strategic importance. Russia was instrumental in impeding the Cyprus deal prepared by then-U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2004 and blocked Annan's report, which was critical of the Greek Cypriot side, from being submitted to the U.N. Security Council.<sup>29</sup> In the Caucasus, Russia is the main supporter of Turkey's rival Armenia. Recently, Turkish-backed Azerbaijan and Russian-backed Armenia clashed again over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Russia's use of military force against Georgia was against Turkey's interests—demonstrating Russian hard power in the Caucasus, as well as Turkey and the West's inability to prevent it. And after the Ukrainian crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea embarrassed Turkey, which has long patronized the Crimean Tatars, and threatens to turn the Black Sea into a Russian lake.<sup>31</sup>

Still, Turkey chose not to participate in the Western sanctions against Russia in response to Moscow's invasion and annexation of parts of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the crisis was followed by the announcement of a new pipeline project—dubbed Turkish Stream—to bring more Russian gas under the Black Sea to Turkey and, eventually, Europe.<sup>33</sup> But in light of the crisis in bilateral relations triggered by the shoot down, Turkish Stream has been shelved for the time being.<sup>34</sup>

As Evren Balta—a professor of political science at Yıldız Technical University in Istanbul—writes, relations with Russia, which have been presented by successive AKP governments as a foreign policy accomplishment, were in fact defined by “an unequal relation of dependency that worked against Turkey's interests,” the continuation of which “was predicated on the stability of the international status quo.”<sup>35</sup> Starting with Russia's reaction to the Arab revolts—particularly the NATO intervention in Libya—and the Ukraine crisis, the international status quo was anything but stable.

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## The Syrian debacle

The most important disagreement between President Putin and President Erdoğan is Syria. Turkey, after an initial effort to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to reform, turned vehemently against the Baathist dictator, while Russia has lent its full support to the regime from the beginning. In retrospect, Turkey appears to have underestimated Russia and Iran's determination to prop up the Syrian regime. In its quest to topple Assad, Turkey has actively supported Syrian opposition groups and looked the other way at its border crossings, allowing relatively unfettered access to Syrian and foreign fighters.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as the Syrian war became more violent and sectarianism intensified, Turkish foreign policy turned away from its traditional secular orientation and favored a pro-Sunni stance and discourse.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey's goals changed somewhat in 2014, when American aerial support of Syrian Kurdish forces led by the PYD held off a determined Islamic State assault on the town of Kobani. The PYD and its armed militia—the People's Protection Units, or YPG—are affiliates of the PKK, which has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. Turkey therefore considers their consolidation of power in northern Syria, where they have set up a de facto government, to be a major security threat.<sup>38</sup> In response, Turkey's Syria policy changed; Ankara now had two targets in Syria: the Assad regime and PYD. To secure both goals, Turkey intensified cooperation with Saudi Arabia and jointly supplied more weapons and money to Arab and Turkmen opposition groups while refusing to cooperate with anti-Islamic State coalition activities in support of the Syrian Kurds.<sup>39</sup> When Russia stepped up its intervention in Syria at the end of September 2015 to rescue the Assad regime, its first target was not the Islamic State but the Turkish- and Saudi-backed opposition groups that were advancing rapidly into regime-held territory in northern Syria.<sup>40</sup>

The Russian intervention was devastating to Turkey's policy in Syria, and in that light, Moscow can be said to have provoked the downing of the Russian plane. Russia had already increased its presence in the eastern Mediterranean with the express intention of defending its military base in Tartus, Syria. The deployment of Russian attack planes to Syria at the end of September sparked several incidents that foreshadowed the trouble ahead between Russian and Turkish forces. On October 3, a Russian fighter jet entered Turkish airspace and was escorted out by Turkish jets. The Russian ambassador claimed that this was a navigation error.<sup>41</sup> The next day, a Russian MiG-29 approached Turkish airspace from Syria and locked its radar onto two Turkish jets cruising the Turkish side of the border. On October 5, the show repeated, with a Russian plane locking its radar on eight Turkish jets, again cruising within Turkish territory.<sup>42</sup>

These incidents suggest that one goal of the Russian intervention was to impede Turkey's political and strategic success in Syria. The Russian intervention made it almost impossible to overthrow the Assad regime. The Russian air force incapacitated the opposition troops that Turkey supported, both newly formed Turkmen brigades and jihadi-oriented Arab groups. These developments were sufficiently damaging to Turkey's interests to lead Ankara to down a Russian plane and thereby nullify 15 years of investment in building better relations with Russia. One plausible explanation for this risky reaction is Turkey calculated that, since it could not take on the Russian military in Syria alone, downing the plane might be enough to bring NATO into Syria more actively on the side of Turkey. However, while both NATO and the United States took Turkey's side legally and offered additional military reassurance, they considered the matter separately from the wider Syria crisis.

The net result of the downing of the Russian plane, therefore, was the defeat of Turkey's plans in Syria and a setback in its strategic ambition of acting as a regional power that determines the course of events in the Middle East. Effectively, Turkey has little leverage now over military developments in Syria. Ankara considers the PYD a genuine security threat but cannot convince the United States to stop helping the organization gain ground. Diplomatically, Ankara can still block the PYD from attending the Geneva peace talks but has not been able to offer an alternative to its success against the Islamic State, which adds to the group's international legitimacy.

Support for the PYD is one of the areas of common ground between Washington and Moscow since the Russian intervention in Syria. Moscow has said it does not consider the PKK a terrorist organization and gave the PYD permission to open an office in Moscow. The main goal of Russia vis-à-vis Turkey in Syria is now accomplished: Turkey's proxies are weak and its sectarian policy is a colossal failure. Strategically, the country is encircled by Russia and its proxies in the Black Sea, Armenia, the eastern Mediterranean, and Syria. Turkey's room for maneuver is exceptionally limited.

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## Conclusion

By downing the Russian plane, the government in Ankara broke the cardinal rule of Turkish diplomacy since Ottoman times: Do not take on Russia unless you can rely on another great power. Turkey's relations with its major ally the United States are, at the very least, troubled. Turkey's perceived half-heartedness in the fight against the Islamic State and its insistence on treating the PYD not as an ally against the Islamic State but as an equivalent terrorist organization have contributed to a lot of static in U.S.-Turkey communications.

Russia has been challenged and is striking back at Turkey by exploiting Turkey's chief vulnerability: the Kurdish problem. As Michael Reynolds suggests, "Turkey's great vulnerability is the Kurdish Question, and the country is currently on the brink of a civil war. Russia has a long and rich history of interest—diplomatic, military and academic—in the Kurds that dates back to the eighteenth century."<sup>43</sup> Some have speculated that Moscow may again be supporting the PKK, which is currently targeting Turkish security forces, as it did during the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, there is evidence of Russia's support for the PYD in Syria.<sup>45</sup> Russia is helping advance Turkey's nightmare by actively supporting the PYD in its efforts to secure control and autonomy along the entire Turkish-Syrian border.

Overtures from the Turkish government since the shoot down incident failed to change the Russian position. Anecdotal evidence does suggest that the initial Russian pressure on Turkish businesses operating in Russia has subsided.<sup>46</sup> The Russian government has also allowed the resumption of direct scheduled flights to Antalya in Turkey after previously banning them.<sup>47</sup> Yet Russian tourism remains well below precrisis levels and the diplomatic standoff continues.<sup>48</sup>

A much-needed recalibration of Turkish foreign policy will have to include repairing relations with Russia. The two countries are economically integrated and a continuation of tensions does not serve either side's interests. Turkish efforts to get closer to Ukraine will not be enough to tilt the balance of power in Turkey's favor. Fortunately, diplomatic relations have not been severed entirely, which presents an opportunity to return to dialogue once tempers have cooled. Turkey may have to formulate a statement that assuages Russian concerns about the incident without sacrificing Turkey's right to self-defense and bring the killer of the Russian pilot to justice. For Turkey, this is a step worth taking.

**\* Correction, May 11, 2016:** This article incorrectly stated the number people killed in the downing of the Russian jet. One pilot was killed, while the other was rescued.

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*The views and opinions expressed in this essay are those of the Center for American Progress. The Center for American Progress produces independent research and policy ideas driven by solutions that we believe will create a more equitable and just world.*



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