



# Russia's Policies in the Middle East and the Pendulum of Turkish-Russian Relations

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## Summary

The Turkish authorities have always considered Russia to be a counterweight to the West. Turkish-Russian bilateral relations, mainly based on economics, developed from the mid-1990s up to November 24, 2015. Importantly:

- Turkish decision makers see Russia as either supportive of Ankara's regional security or as an obstacle.
- Similarly, Russian authorities consider Turkey as either a locomotive of cooperation or an adversary preventing the advancement of Russian interests in its neighborhood.
- The escalation of disagreements in the Middle East between both countries, especially the so-called "plane incident," the downing of a Russian bomber by a Turkish fighter jet on November 24, 2015, had direct negative consequences on the almost two-decade-old Turkish-Russian modus vivendi.
- Syria is the top security issue for Turkish foreign policy-making, not only because of its direct consequences for Ankara's diplomatic and security relations with the West and Russia, but also due to its effects on Turkey's regional position as well as domestic developments.
- A long list of priorities exists, including the re-emergence of the PYD/YPG/PKK as an international actor, the existence of al-Qaeda derivatives on Turkey's borders, the future of Sunni regions after the Islamic State, the increasing legitimacy of the al-Assad regime in Syria, the situation of the refugees, and the future of the pro-Turkish opposition in Syria.

Within this context, as long as the Syrian conflict remains unresolved, despite its deceptive role as a political partner, Russia will hold a decisive balancer role in the realization of

Turkey's interests in Syria. Turkish decision-makers feel they need Russian support to force the United States to change its attitude toward the YPG in Syria. Thus, as long as the Kurdish issue remains an obsession for the Turkish establishment and the US attitude toward the Democratic Union Party and People's Protection Units (PYD, YPG) remains unchanged, Russia will play a stronger and decisive role in shaping Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

This complex web of relations results in an unbalanced, obscure and, at times, self-contradictory Turkish foreign policy. The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) independence referendum on September 25, which Ankara describes as an "irresponsible act," as well as the Kurdish entities' potential role both in Syria and Iraq will determine Turkey's relations with both the US and Russia for the foreseeable future.

## **Introduction**

Turkish-Russian bilateral relations developed with a constant acceleration from the mid-1990s up to November 24, 2015. Turkey and Russia, while considering each other rivals in all neighboring regions in the early 1990s, have changed their perceptions with the aim of establishing a "new strategic partnership in the new century" and started to come closer with a focus to *concentrate on the flip-side of relations*. What does this aspect mean?

To be sure, this view means that Turkish decision-makers see Moscow as either supportive of Ankara's regional security or as an obstacle. Similarly, Russian authorities consider Turkey as either a locomotive of cooperation or an adversary preventing the advancement of Russian interests in its neighborhood. In order not to harm pre-defined Turkish interests vis-à-vis Russia, Ankara displayed a sensitivity since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the sake of not offending Russia, Turkey maintained this cautious attitude toward the Russian War on Georgia in 2008 as well as during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, even after the invasion of Crimea. Nevertheless, the escalation of disagreements in the Middle East between both countries, especially the so called "plane incident," the downing of a Russian Su-24M tactical bomber by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet on November 24, 2015, had direct negative consequences on the almost two-decade old Turkish-Russian *modus vivendi*. The increasing disagreements, competition, and insecurity in the region put any improvements in the political, economic and security-related arenas into a tight spot. At the same time, rising tensions between the West and Russia compromised the already fragile regional balance. Ankara appeared to be stuck in the middle.

Nevertheless, on July 16, 2016, the Turkish people woke up to a different country—one traumatized by the failed coup attempt the day before. It had only been weeks since commentators had begun to speak of a *normalization* or *reset* of Turkish foreign policy, following the resumption of bilateral ties with Israel (for the first time since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010) and Russia (President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had just sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin, expressing his regrets for the downing of the Russian jet in November 2015). Erdoğan spoke of these changes in terms of a win-win approach for Turkey's relations with the world. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım hinted at cautious policy shifts vis-à-vis Iraq, Syria and Egypt as reflection of a new foreign policy after April 16, 2016, with the motto of "earning more friends than enemies."

One month later, President Erdoğan paid his first visit abroad in the aftermath of the failed coup to St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016. This visit marked a milestone in the bilateral relations between the two nations after an almost nine-month break, which was labeled as the *annus horribilis* in Turkish-Russian relations. After their meeting in St. Petersburg, the two leaders highlighted their substantial and constructive dialogue on all issues of mutual interest and outlined a roadmap for restoring ties to a pre-“plane incident” level. Both leaders agreed that regional problems needed to be resolved through joint initiatives, implying that this should happen under the tutelage of Turkey and Russia.

Following the St. Petersburg meeting, the Russian chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, visited the Turkish capital Ankara on September 15, 2016. The Russian general’s visit was the first top-level military-to-military contact after the two countries had worked out their differences over the downing of the Russian tactical bomber. Gerasimov was also the first Russian chief of the General Staff to visit Ankara after an 11-year lull. According to official statements, Gerasimov and his Turkish counterpart, General Hulusi Akar, discussed military developments in Eurasia. While Turkish military sources described the meeting as “fruitful,” most observers focused on the prospects of developing a common stand for the resolution of problems in the Middle East, namely the Syrian conundrum. In addition to the ongoing normalization of bilateral relations, it seems that Turkey finally managed to secure an understanding with Russia on Syria, from which Moscow began to reap benefits beyond its southern borders. The turn of events in Syria and the operational developments related to Operation Euphrates Shield, which the Turkish military launched to clear Syria’s northern border area of extremists, could be seen as a reasonable clue for assuming that Ankara received a positive response from Moscow. Since then, the war in Syria was a major focus of the leaders’ discussion in each and every top-level meetings. Moreover, Syria continues to affect Turkey’s relations with its neighbors and traditional allies not only in the Middle East but also to the north, especially the Black Sea and the Caucasus.

This paper aims to analyze the last two years’ turbulent Turkish-Russian relations, being shaped, more than anything else, under the multi-layered pressures of the Syrian crisis, and providing a prognosis about the future. What are the key drivers first of contention and then rapprochement? What are the limits of Russian-Turkish reconciliation/cooperation while the factors of contention still prevail in Syria? For that aim, the chapter will approach Turkey’s perception of Russian policies in the Middle East from a historical Turkish-Russian relations perspective of competition vs. cooperation.

### **Turkish-Russian Relations: A Brief Historical Perspective**

The Turkish authorities have always considered Russia to be a counterweight to the West and have played the Russia card in their negotiations with Washington and Brussels on different issues. Turkish-Russian bilateral relations developed with a constant acceleration from the mid-1990s. Despite budding relations between the two countries, it is not easy to say that the legacy of historic distrust between them has been successfully removed from their political relations. Ankara and Moscow could not manage to establish fully harmonious relations on some basic political issues such as the Kurdish issue, the Cyprus conundrum, or Armenia-related disagreements. Turkey’s NATO membership and the tricky European Union accession process are also concerns for the Russian side.

Turkey's alienation from the US and the EU is a positive development from Moscow's point of view. Similar to the current political and security environment in the Middle East, Turkey is quarrelling with its Western allies especially over Iraq and the Kurdish issue since the early 2000s; this approach and attitude is shaping Ankara's policy toward Moscow. Turkey disappointed the US because of Ankara's reluctance to help topple Saddam Hussein, while the US alienated Turkey because of American forces' active engagement with the Kurds without having Turkish consent. The Turkish parliament's rejection of the deal that would allow US troops to move through Turkish territories to open a northern front in the war in March 2003 created a major crisis in Turkish-American relations. The decision was a severe blow to US war plans, which the US military was compelled to change while troop ships waited offshore and out of sight of the Turkish port of Iskenderun. This was a turning point in US-Turkish military relations, which hit rock bottom when the Turkish Special Forces compound in Süleymaniye was stormed by their American counterparts. US Special Forces humiliated the Turkish military by hooding the Turkish soldiers they apprehended. This event left a notable scar in the memory of the Turkish military as well. The current discomfort between CENTCOM and the Turkish Army in Syria and Iraq stems from almost 20 years ago with the Kremlin watching carefully.

The lack of progress in Turkey-EU relations and problems between Russia and the EU regarding the urgency to fight against extremism, namely by Kurds and Chechens, contributed to changing perceptions. It is now apparent that both parties have started to see each other as potential partners with a capacity to open up bright futures in Eurasia.

In November 2015, the downing of the Russian plane erased fifteen years of progress in bilateral relations in almost 20 seconds. A patriotic fury erupted in Russia that caught Ankara off guard. Putin warned of "serious consequences" for what he described as "a stab in the back" by "terrorist accomplices."<sup>1</sup> He commented, "It appears that Allah decided to punish Turkey's ruling clique by depriving them of wisdom and judgment." The escalation in rhetoric was followed by a series of quick and harsh economic measures against Turkish companies and exports. Over the next days, the two countries effectively froze diplomatic ties, hostility prevailed in the public domain, and the absence of some four million Russian tourists dealt a significant blow to Turkey's tourism industry. Combined with the declining number of European tourists due to Islamic State attacks, Turkish tourism suffered its worst period since the Iraq war. This crisis resulted in bilateral trade dipping to \$23.3 billion in 2015 from 31.5 billion in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

What turned best friends into the worst of foes overnight was mainly the two countries' uncompromising perspectives towards Syria. Syria had been the top political issue for Turkey and Russia since 2012. Both Ankara and Moscow failed to find a mutually acceptable solution to the war in Syria at the high-level discussions between the two countries during 2012–2015. While Ankara remained dedicated to the idea of regime change in Damascus and continued to support opposition groups along its borders, Russia was determined from the beginning not to allow Syria to become another Libya, where multilateral action led to regime change that was a step into the unknown, with Moscow remaining unwavering in its support for the al-Assad regime.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Russia conducted its first military intervention beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. For Russia, the al-Assad regime's survival is its main interest in Syria while Moscow saw Iran as a natural and most trustworthy partner in the flow of events in Syria. Moreover, Erdoğan's vibrant support for the Arab Spring and the uncompromising Turkish attitude concerning the al-Assad regime in Syria have been the main obstacles to advancing Russian interests in Syria.

## **Russia in Syria and Turkish-Russian Relations**

From a Turkish point of view, Russia is one of the principal actors in defining regional stability and security in the Middle East since the Cold War years. Russia's main concern in the region is to consolidate and maintain its power while restricting the presence of the other powers. Naturally, this attitude is a reflection of Russian assertiveness in its neighborhood and has always been a concern for Turkish authorities. Among the other Middle Eastern countries, Syria has always been a priority for Russia. Russian influence in Syria was reduced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but Russia managed to hold on to its naval supply base of Tartus, which was established during the 1970s and continued to ship in arms and ammunitions to the regime's military forces. Russian support to the Syrian regime increased dramatically when the Arab Spring began in 2011. Russian-Syrian ties strengthened rapidly because of the legacy of the Cold War relationship and Syria, next to Iran, was perceived as a natural ally in the Middle East. In order to prevent unilateral Western involvement in the resolution of uprisings across the Middle East, Russia decided to take part in all those events actively. Moscow's interpretation of Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi's removal in 2011 is seen by the Kremlin as directly undermining Russia's global role and influence in the Arab World. Russia failed to take control of the flow of events in Libya; so in order to show its decisive role in the Middle East developments, the Kremlin decided to enter Syria. Putin's action was one of the direct ways of showing that Russia is a strong power.

The first serious sign of Turkish-Russian political disagreements emerged just after the Russian invasion of Crimea. Turkey acknowledged Russia's annexation as illegal and the referendum illegitimate, and thus Ankara does not recognize the de-facto situation in Crimea.<sup>4</sup> Turkish commentators question the limits of Turkish-Russian relations when Moscow is acting aggressively in Turkey's close neighborhood.

Turkey also sees Russia throwing its weight around in Syria, which has emerged as a new but more vibrant arena of conflicting interests and expectations. In reality, Erdoğan and Putin consistently failed to find a mutually acceptable solution to the war in Syria between 2012 and 2015. That Russia sought to intervene in Syria occurred at the same time as Turkey's press began to discuss a prospective military intervention is deemed to be a coincidence. When the first news of Russian military's operational build-up in Syria hit the headlines in Turkey in September 2015, Turkey started to feel the hindering impact of Russia's opposition to its policies in Syria.<sup>5</sup> Following a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu, in Sochi, on September 17, 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly expressed Russian doubts regarding Turkey's policies in Syria, especially when it came to the decision to join the US-led anti-Islamic State (formerly Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS)—and at the time, at least by implication, anti-al-Assad—coalition. This reaction was unmistakably triggered by Turkey's decision to open the İncirlik Base, in Turkey's southern province of Adana, to the US military for operations against ISIS. In Russia's view, this act completely failed to take Moscow's concerns into account. However, in reality, there is little to suggest that the Turkish decision to make İncirlik available to the anti-ISIS coalition had much to do with Turkey's strategic calculus when it comes to creating a direct impact on Russian-US relations. Rather, the Turkish decision seems to have been motivated by a concern related to Turkey's desire to harness international support for its own aspiration of establishing No Fly Zones in support of the opposition groups fighting against the al-Assad regime, largely modeled on the No Fly Zones established in Iraq following the Gulf War of 1992. In that

regard, the Turkish decisions of the period may be understood in terms of trying to secure US support for its own agenda and priorities in Syria. Given the course of events, this does seem like an exercise largely in vain (if not totally) due to a misreading of US prerogatives in Syria. In this context, and in line with the current state of Turkish-US relations, it is important to note that large parts of Turkish society, and an important number of opinion pundits close to the government in Turkey, have interpreted the situation as one that involved the deliberate misleading of Turkish foreign policy by the US. It also has to be noted that this rhetoric played a critical role in shaping the internal discourse in Turkey.

President Erdoğan's Moscow visit to open the renovated 111-year-old Grand Mosque, on September 23, 2015, served to remind Russia of Turkey's priorities in Syria. The Turkish leader began his speech with a quote from Tolstoy: "The most significant endeavor in life is Goodness." He then continued, alluding to his disagreement with the Russian Air Force's indiscriminate bombings in support of the regime in Syria:

Tolstoy, in another one of his stories, said that fire in a single house risks burning an entire village. We should analyze all developments in our region from that perspective. The flames in the Middle East must be extinguished with kindness, justice and conscience. That is why we have welcomed two million refugees and have been helping people on our territory for the past four years. The solution to the refugee issue is not closing borders but guaranteeing a peaceful life in their homes.<sup>6</sup>

This speech marked Erdoğan's signaling his displeasure with Russia's stance directly and in front of a Russian public, for the first time.

Nevertheless, Russian fighter jets soon began violating Turkish airspace around the province of Hatay and carried out coordinated air strikes against anti-al-Assad forces in Syria, especially against Turkish-supported forces, including the Turkmen in the north of Syria, as early as October 2015. These Russian violations were clearly undermining Turkey's self-declared rules of engagement after Syrian missiles shot down a Turkish Phantom jet off the Mediterranean coast in 2012; they signaled the possibility of a deadly encounter between the parties. President Erdoğan's statement just after his return from Russia and before flying to Strasbourg to attend an anti-terrorism meeting organized by the Union of European Turkish Democrats in early October 2015 hinted at a further escalation of tensions:

Turkey could not endure Russian violations of Turkey's airspace in its campaign in Syria. This campaign would isolate Russia in the course of events. Russia is taking those steps despite Turkey, and that makes us sad and disturbed. Russia has no border with Syria. What is Russia trying to do here? It is doing so since the regime in Syria demanded [to intervene in the country], but there is no obligation to conduct such an operation with each regime's demand.<sup>7</sup>

It was during this period that Erdoğan started to talk with a raised tone of voice after NATO condemned the increasing violations of Turkish airspace:

There some people who display sensitivity as far as to end the war in Syria or Syrian crisis. State terror caused the death of almost 350,000 people in Syria. But some actors are still trying to secure the regime. Iran is among them. Russia is another one. NATO has issued a stern ultimatum. We cannot endure it. Some steps that we do not desire are being taken. It is not suitable for Turkey to accept them. This is also beyond

the principles of NATO. Our [good] relations with Russia are obvious. But they would lose us. If Russia loses Turkey, it would lose a lot.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that “Turkey’s rules of engagement were clear about whoever violates its airspace. Turkey maintains the right to take military action against any object that enters its territory. I should express it clearly, even if it is Syria, Russia or any other country’s planes, Turkey’s military engagement rules are valid for all.” Davutoğlu also asserted that Russia assured Turkey that its airspace would not be violated again. Such declarations heralded Turkey’s realization, once again, that in the face of increasing disagreement and harassment of Turkey’s airspace by Russia, the only balancing act could come from its traditional alliances.

The clearest message from those statements was Turkey’s readiness to take the risk of even suspending bilateral relations with Russia for the sake of realizing Ankara’s priorities in Syria. Nevertheless, despite the nominal support of its NATO allies against certain security concerns, Turkey failed to convince its Western partners to advance its interests in Syria, including establishing mechanisms to respond to the growing ISIS threat and creating security zones by enforcing No Fly Zones in northern Syria.

In November 2015, Russia increased its aggressive air strikes against Turkish-backed opposition groups in Idlib and Latakia, in particular against the Türkmen Dağı in the Jabal Turkman region. Suddenly, the position of Turkmen opposition forces became a major topic in the Turkish media and the issue morphed in the popular imagination with “Russians attacking Turkmens,” especially in the pro-government media. Both Prime Minister Davutoğlu and President Erdoğan made passionate pleas about the plight of the Turkmens and the bombardment of civilians, publicly calling on Russia to halt its campaign. The Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, was summoned to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on November 19, 2015, and warned of the consequences, while Ankara tried to enlist NATO support over repeated Russian violations of its airspace.<sup>9</sup> While the Russian media was enjoying the spectacle of a resurgent military fighting “terrorists” and “jihadists” in Syria, the Turkish public became polarized: pro-government newspapers focused on the plight of the Turkmens and complained of Russian-Kurdish connections, while anti-government commentators relished the collapse of Turkey’s Syria policy. Ankara decided to take its case regarding the bombardment of Turkmen civilians to the United Nations. But events on the ground were moving faster than policies.<sup>10</sup> The Russian/Syrian advances were successful in repelling opposition forces. In a front-page headline on November 21, 2015, Islamist newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, which has close ties to the Turkish government, reported: “Turkmen Mountain Falls!”<sup>11</sup>

The aforementioned flow of events in the final months of 2015 at last brought the two parties to the “plane incident” on November 24. This new stage in Turkish-Russian relations was a historic event for Russia and, as previously mentioned, President Putin described the incident as “a stab in the back” by “terrorist accomplices.”<sup>12</sup> He warned of “serious consequences” as “It appears that Allah decided to punish Turkey’s ruling clique by depriving them of wisdom and judgment.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite strong statements by top Turkish officials, neither the Russian authorities nor Turkey’s Western allies were anticipating such a strong response from Turkey. The basic question that has to be answered at this point is: Why did Erdoğan resort to an aggressive response instead of opening diplomatic channels? As a matter of fact, it is still a tough

endeavor to answer the question why two countries, despite the existence of official mechanisms to swiftly bring top decision makers together, failed to apply the tradition of “concentrating on the flip-side of relations” on this matter.

The answer to this question lies mainly in the structural design of Turkish-Russian relations. For a long time, the two parties sustained their relations on the principle of compartmentalization—that is, geopolitical issues and economic cooperation were segregated as not only separate but distinctive agendas. Such a “seconderization” of geopolitics looks strange when one considers the strategic cultures of both parties, which are heavily laden by grand geopolitical narratives. Expectedly, in an environment where geopolitics had returned to the agenda, it did so in an overwhelming manner, threatening the real previous gains regarding bilateral trade and energy relations. We may classify the quick game changers of Turkish-Russian relations as domestic and external factors, as far as the Syrian crisis was concerned.

### **Domestic Factors**

When the plane incident happened in late 2015, Turkey had already been facing controversial domestic developments that negatively affected political stability within the country. As mentioned above, Erdoğan and his ruling party enthusiastically supported the Arab Spring. But this support turned bitter in 2013, after the start of the Gezi Protests across Turkey. The leadership and pro-government media took a particularly critical stance against the revolutions and began to allege “Western involvement” in all those events. The second Tahrir Square rebellion, which led to the collapse of the Morsi government in Egypt, was a signal to the Erdoğan government to take an unsympathetic tone toward mass protests on Turkish streets. And with the Ukrainian Maidan revolution and mass protests all over the country in February 2014, the reservations by Turkish authorities toward popular street demonstrations were enhanced.

Erdoğan presented the establishment of direct presidential system as a solution to the unstable political environment in Turkey. He was elected President of the Turkish Republic with 51.8 percent of the votes on August 10, 2014, in the first ever direct presidential elections since the establishment of the Republic.

As far as the Kurds were concerned, Erdogan pursued a policy of social reconciliation and launched a policy of “Kurdish Opening” during his term as prime minister. The detente ended in July 2015, with members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) killing Turkish policemen and soldiers, following two years of relative calm. The reasons behind the PKK’s reversal of its strategy might be summarized as follows: Firstly, with the increasing “success” of its Syrian branch, the PYD, in the northern parts of Syria, the terrorist organization believed it saw an opportunity to position itself as an international political actor. The active cooperation with the US in the latter’s campaign against ISIS in Syria emboldened the PKK regarding its operations in Turkey. Another important factor may have been linked to US materiel support and military training, which the PKK felt enhanced its capabilities and fighting skills. The PKK also apparently felt that there was room for it to build on the public credibility it had garnered fighting against ISIS in Syria and leverage its reputation. This element was thought to work for increasing its support in the West. Another potentially influential element was the PKK’s fall-out with KRG President Masoud Barzani, in northern Syria. The PKK, for the first time, felt that, after expelling ISIS, it could secure territorial



domination that could not only provide an alternative logistics base to Kandil, but also serve as a test case for its vision of a political system, after years of terrorism activities in Turkey.

Most importantly, after the HDP's strong performance in the June 2015 election, the military cadre of the PKK in Kandil seems to have felt that it was losing the initiative when it came to dominating the "Kurdish cause" in Turkey. In the immediate aftermath of June elections, as the HDP increased its vote share and enlarged its base, a renewed discourse around the HDP becoming a "Party of Turkey"—rather than a single agenda, ethnic political entity—was taking shape. The leadership of the PKK seems to have taken little, if any, pleasure from that development, which simply fueled its appetite for a renewed militarization of its conflict with Turkey. Under the impact of these factors, the PKK started a new urban campaign called the "war of ditches and barricades." The Turkish government's quick response was to return to traditional military methods: specifically, the Turkish army stormed urban centers such as Sur, Silopi and Cizre in southeastern Turkey to prevent the PKK from becoming entrenched there.

Ankara's "new" understanding of security, combined with its growing fight against terrorism within Turkey's borders, had a natural spillover effect on Turkey's policymaking in Syria. When Russian forces arrived in that war-torn country, the Syrian issue, interwoven with the fight against the PKK, had already become a domestic matter of concern for Turkey. Moreover, the Turkish government heavily used this argument of pairing ISIS with the PYD/PKK as a strategy to delegitimize the PKK's image in the West; Ankara's goal was to have the PYD in Syria also included on the list of legitimate and internationally recognized terrorist targets. Nevertheless, the political disagreements between Turkey and the US and, of course, with Russia for a time prevented Turkish forces from deploying beyond the country's borders in any land or air operations—Turkey's military was limited to cross-border artillery fire.

## **External Factors**

Turkish nationalist and conservative security circles traditionally believe in the existence of external forces that continually seek to disperse and destroy Turkey. Therefore, they allege, it is necessary to defend the state and Turkish territorial integrity against this danger. For these circles, the Western powers are continually looking to "weaken and carve up Turkey." Russia's indifferent attitude, even after the aforementioned open calls by Erdoğan for joint operations in Syria as well as the US's prioritization of the PYD/YPG/PKK role in its anti-ISIS campaign were seen as "evidence" of these intentions.

The most striking example of this robust narrative was the famous phrase "precious loneliness," penned by President Erdoğan's chief policy adviser, Ibrahim Kalın. These words were meant to express Turkey's "honorable stance" against coups and slaughters, as opposed to the world's ignorance of the conflicts in Egypt and Syria.<sup>14</sup> During the early years of Justice and Development (AK) Party government, Turkey embraced the foreign policy perspective of Ahmet Davutoglu, characterized by the motto "zero problems with neighbors." But in time, Turkey had few neighbors left with which it did not have problems. Notably, it fell out with Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq and saw its friendly relations with its Western partners compromised by a lack of trust and common ground. Russia might be singled out as the only significant foreign actor that did not enforce pre-conditions on Turkey when it came to deepening strategic and economic relations.

The Turkish authorities already understood as early as 2015 that Bashar al-Assad was not going to give up power any time soon, and Ankara's priorities shifted toward the single issue of how to stop the PYD/YPG from conquering more territory adjacent to Turkey's border in northern Syria. This factor is an internal part of the Turkish plan to prevent not only the aspirations of PKK separatism, but also any separatist Kurdish movement beyond Turkey's borders. Consequently, when Russian operations began targeting Turkish-trained forces in Syria that were fighting both against ISIS and the PYD/YPG/PKK, from Turkey's point of view, this indiscriminate Russian approach diminished Turkey's operational influence in Syria—and this was not to be tolerated anymore.

### **What Happened Afterwards?**

The first immediate result of the November 2015 downing of the Russian jet was that the Turkish population rallied around its government and the president himself. Yet, Turkish leaders approached the situation with a conciliatory tone, putting forward a narrative of defending Turkey's basic right to secure its borders. Meanwhile, the tone in pro-government media was less restrained and presented a view that "foreign powers" want to destroy Turkey's territorial integrity and international reputation. For some, "Turks taught Putin a lesson and Erdoğan destroyed Putin's charisma as a world leader," or, "Turkish eagles warned Russia like this." Some columnists even welcomed the plane incident as a clear sign that Turkey was becoming increasingly free in foreign policy terms for the first time since the Cold War. Yıldırım Oğur said, "Turkey is making its own way [...] it is constructing and defending its own position by staying within the alliances. ...Erdoğan's and Davutoğlu's self-confident and down-to earth new foreign policy perspectives are behind this success."<sup>15</sup>

However, were these observations accurate? When we look at what happened afterwards, the flow of events shows a totally different picture. First of all, the incident sparked animosity in Russia. The Russian media ran negative reports and accused Ankara of supporting ISIS, even claiming that Erdoğan and his family were involved in reselling ISIS oil. Furthermore, Russia targeted Turkey with economic sanctions. The tourism, agriculture, construction, and to a lesser degree, energy sector were the first that felt the direct results of these actions. Both countries' unique approaches to "greatness" were fully on display.

More importantly, Russia's reemergence as a decisive factor in shaping the key outcomes of the Syrian conflict made Turkey's situation more fragile as far as the Kurdish factor was concerned. Russia, along with the US, intensified its contacts with both Turkish and Syrian Kurds and, accordingly, undermined Turkey's room for maneuver in Syria. Within a month of the incident, the Russian media began reporting on the Kurdish question and the plight of the group inside Turkey and in Syria, discarding the tacit agreement between Ankara and Moscow to stay clear of Kurdish and Chechen issues. In January 2016, the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, publicly supported a petition signed by Turkish academics condemning human rights abuses in Ankara's fight against the PKK. In a surprise move, Russia also extended a warm welcome to the Turkish pro-Kurdish party HDP, and invited its leader, Selahattin Demirtas, to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow that December. The meeting marked the beginning of a series of contacts between Moscow and Kurdish groups; Syrian Kurds were even invited to open offices in Moscow and Yerevan. These developments clearly signaled to Turkey that the linkage and balance established between the Kurdish and Chechen issues was broken under the weight of the two

countries' differences in Syria that had reached a climax with the downing of the Russian Su-24M. At this stage, Turkey found its hands tied and, therefore, turned and found refuge in its traditional alliances.

The immediate impact of the deterioration in Turkish-Russian relations was Turkey's quick U-turn to its historical allies—the US and NATO. As was the case just after the Second World War, when Soviet territorial claims pushed Turkey toward the West and opened a path to NATO membership, Turkish authorities immediately asked their Alliance partners for solidarity and protection against a probable Russian assault. Although Ankara was unable to persuade NATO to evoke Article 5 on collective defense, the North Atlantic Alliance expressed its support for Turkey's territorial integrity. Ankara felt the need to return to the Western security architecture rather than “going it alone,” as per the idea penned by Ibrahim Kalın at the height of the Arab Spring.

Domestic developments were also not promising in those days. Erdoğan's expectations he would be able to establish a direct presidential political system that clarified the powers of the head of state, as well as his need and to achieve the “Turkey 2023” program, necessitated a decisive shift in power. In order to facilitate a brand-new domestic and foreign policy, Erdoğan enhanced his cooperation with nationalist factions, intensified his fight against the so-called “parallel state” and, replaced Davutoğlu with a new AK Party chairman and prime minister, Binali Yıldırım, in May 2016. Prime Minister Yıldırım hinted quickly at policy shifts *vis-à-vis* Iraq, Syria, and Egypt as a reflection of a new Turkish foreign policy after April 16, 2016. The government's new foreign policy motto would be “earning more friends than enemies.”

As a reflection of this new foreign policy perspective, Ankara first initiated talks with Israel to normalize bilateral relations. Then, in order to mend bilateral ties between Ankara and Moscow, President Erdoğan sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin expressing regret for the downing of the Russian Su-24. Erdoğan, in his letter, expressed Turkey's readiness to restore relations with Moscow by calling Russia “a friend and a strategic partner.” Prime Minister Yıldırım saying noted that Ankara was ready to compensate Russia for the downing of the plane.

This foreign policy behavior is a sea change in Turkish foreign policy-making since the plane incident. Moreover, an increased number of ISIS attacks on Turkish soil and the failed July 2016 coup further distracted Ankara from Syria and quickened the pace of events in the direction of rapprochement with Moscow.

Erdoğan took these steps because of Ankara's perceived lack of Western support in tackling the attempted coup. Turkey remained upset and strongly critical of the US and EU response to the coup attempt, while Russia saw it as an opportunity to provide a supportive shoulder for Turkey.

More importantly, while the internal fight against PKK terrorism was ascending on a daily basis, preventing the PYD/YPG/PKK from expanding their operations west of the Euphrates became a new red line for Turkey. Meanwhile, the US's insistence on cooperating with the PYD on the battlefield, together with Washington's continued arming of the Syrian Kurdish forces even with heavy equipment, and the appearance of pictures in the Turkish media of US special operations forces wearing the insignia of the YPG in Syria were accepted as tangible signs of US support for separatist Kurdish groups. Turkish public opinion started to

acknowledge the PYD/YPG as the US “combat boot” in Syria, which aims to establish a Kurdish state along the southern borders of Turkey.

Increasing anti-US sentiment in public opinion contributed to the Turkish government’s search for a new partner on the Syrian issue. Under these undesirable circumstances, a well-known historical “lesser evil,” Russia, emerged as a balancer to realize Turkey’s interests in Syria. Russia, despite its declared support for al-Assad’s regime, which before had contributed to the souring of Turkish-Russian relations, nevertheless now appeared as a much better alternative to the “pro-separatist PYD supporter”—the United States. The Russian choice also prevented Turkey’s isolation in the region by bringing Iran into the equation on Turkey’s side. Iran had always been a potential natural ally for Turkey when it came to the Kurdish issue. As a result, Turkey’s old rivals, Iran and Russia, though key backers of Syrian regime, quickly became Ankara’s new allies against the US-led coalition.

The launch of Operation Euphrates Shield by the Turkish Armed Forces, on August 24, 2016, is the most tangible result of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement to date.<sup>16</sup> The operation’s main objectives were to maintain border security and confront ISIS terrorism within the framework of the UN Charter. The Turkish authorities were also targeting the PKK terrorist organization and its affiliates, the PYD/YPG, by saying that the terrorists “will not be allowed to establish a corridor of terror on Turkey’s doorstep.” Operation Euphrates Shield is being conducted in coordination with the US and Russia, but the main factor that has allowed Turkey to carry it out is the normalization of relations with Russia. Specifically, Turkey was able to reach a tacit agreement with Russia that enabled Turkish forces to operate in and near Syrian airspace. Russian cooperation has been persistent, since for the Turkish military campaign in Syria to proceed, Russia first had to ease its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) measures against Turkey. Turkish-Russian coordination has enabled Turkey to act with a relatively free hand in Syria after a hiatus of months. Ultimately, Euphrates Shield allowed the Turkish army to embed itself in Syria and create a buffer zone preventing the PYD/YPG from gaining strategic depth and expanding its area of influence to Turkey’s borders west of the Euphrates River. The operation also contributed positively to the Turkish army’s shattered morale after the coup attempt and distracted the military’s attention from domestic political issues to external, security-related priorities.

Thanks to Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey reemerged as an actor able to secure its borders via land and air operations. Turkish forces took control of the Azez-Cerablus-El Bab triangle and became a military force on the ground, giving it greater claim to negotiate with the big powers against the smaller and non-recognized belligerent entities in Syria.

The diplomatic consequence of this Turkish military show of force has been Turkey’s role in the Astana peace process, held in the Kazakhstani capital. After almost a year, Turkish officials managed to find an effective position for Turkey in the diplomatic arena and, together with their Russian and Iranian counterparts, issued a joint statement in Moscow on December 20, 2016, in which the parties declared that they agreed on the steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict.<sup>17</sup> The three governments declared their support for the territorial integrity of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and non-sectarian Syrian Arab Republic and called for a non-military solution to the Syrian conflict under UNSC Resolution 2254. More importantly, Turkey, together with Russia and Iran, declared its readiness to facilitate and become the guarantor of the prospective agreement/peace accord being negotiated between the Syrian government and the opposition. This approach is a clear elevation of Turkey’s diplomatic status in the resolution of the Syrian issue since the start of

the civil war. Turkey's position shifted significantly as a result of the Astana process, although Ankara is beholden to Moscow for making such a triumvirate possible.

Despite some brief interruptions caused by disagreements regarding whether the negotiating parties represented the real military opposition in Syria or not, talks in Astana and between Russia and Jordan have resulted in an agreement on the creation of several de-escalation zones in Syria. The agreement proposes the establishment of such zones in Idlib, the Turkmen mountains, parts of the Homs governorate, and areas on the outskirts of Damascus, including Ghouta and in Deraa in the south. This result, undoubtedly, was in line with the Turkish policy of establishing security/buffer zones in Syria to prevent the flow of refugees and to protect the Turkmen population without giving any advantageous position to the Kurds in Syria.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, Syria is currently the top security issue for Turkish foreign policy, not only because of its direct consequences for Ankara's diplomatic and security relations with the West and Russia, but also due to its effects on Turkey's regional position as well as domestic developments. As was mentioned above, the Turkish government faces a long list of Syria-related priorities, including the re-emergence of the PYD/YPG/PKK as an international actor, the existence of al-Qaeda derivatives on Turkey's borders, the future of Sunni regions after the defeat of the Islamic State, the increasing legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, the situation of the refugees, and the future of the pro-Turkish opposition in Syria.

Among these priorities, the immediate concern for Turkey is the military, diplomatic, and political support that the United States and Russia had been providing to the PYD/YPG/PKK since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. After the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, the Turkish authorities have been more vocal in their complaints about the US providing weapons and ammunitions to the PKK and its affiliates in Syria. The authorities now assert that Russia better understands Ankara's sensitivities concerning this issue and has stopped giving military support to the YPG. Within this context, as long as the Syrian conflict remains unresolved, Russia will play a decisive balancer role in the realization of Turkey's interests in Syria—despite Moscow's deceptive role as a political partner. Turkish decision-makers feel that they need Russian support to force the US to change its attitude toward the YPG in Syria. While the Kurdish issue remains an obsession for the Turkish establishment and as long as the US attitude toward the PYD/YPG remains unchanged, Russia can be expected to play a strong and decisive role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. The flow of events and Ankara's diplomatic initiatives indicate that Turkish officials are trying to keep Iran and Russia on the Turkish side in Syria. This paradoxical attitude is the result of the three parties' longtime geopolitical competition in the region, which drives their periodic conflicts as well as their cooperation. These current developments apparently have made Turkey an actor again on the Syrian battlefield; but in return, Russia is playing the Kurdish card with a much louder voice, thereby making Moscow a factor in Ankara's relations with the West. This complex web of relations results in an unbalanced, obscure and, at times, self-contradictory Turkish foreign policy. The KRG's upcoming independence referendum on September 25—which Turkey describes as an “irresponsible act”—combined with the Kurds' potential role both in Syria and Iraq will determine Turkey's relations with both the US and Russia for the foreseeable future.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Putin sırtımızdan bıçaklandık,” *NTV*, November 24, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> “Türkiye-Rusya Ticaret Hacminde Büyük Düşüş”, *Milliyet*, February 12, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, *With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance*, ECFR Policy Brief, June 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> See Turkish Foreign Ministry’s statements e.g. “Kırım’da Düzenlenen Referandum Hakkında”, No:86, March 17, 2014 and “Kırım’daki Son gelişmeler Hk.,” No:77, March 6, 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> Rob Crilly, “Russia is Building Military Base in Syria,” *Daily Telegraph*, September 5, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin ile birlikte Moskova Merkez Camii’nin açılışını yaptı”, *Hürriyet*, September 23, 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’dan Rusya Açıklaması,” *Ntv.com.tr*, October 4, 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> “Rusya Türkiye’yi kaybederse çok şey kaybeder,” *TRT Haber*, October 6, 2016, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/rusya-turkiye-yi-kaybederse-cok-sey-kaybeder-207330.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> Deniz Zeyrek, “Turkey warns Russia over border security,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-warns-russia-over-border-security.aspx?PageID=238&NID=91568&NewsCatID=510>. Ambassador Karlov was shot dead by a Turkish policeman in protest at Russia’s involvement in Aleppo on December 19, 2016. The incident happened a day after protests in Turkey over Russian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Both leaders, Erdoğan and Putin agreed that the incident was an act of provocation aimed at disrupting the normalization of bilateral ties and peace process in Syria.
- <sup>10</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, *With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance*, ECFR Policy Brief, June 2016.
- <sup>11</sup> “Türkmen Dağı Düştü!” *Yeni Şafak*, November 21, 2015. For an online version see <http://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/turkmen-dagi-dustu-2344150>.
- <sup>12</sup> “Putin çok ağır konuştu: Terör işbirlikçileri tarafından sırtımızdan bıçaklandık,” *Diken*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/putin-cok-agir-konustu-teror-isbirlikcileri-tarafindan-sirtimizdan-bicaklandik/>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Uçak krizi patladığından beri Erdoğan ve Putin neler söylediler?” *CNN Turk*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.cnnturk.com/dunya/ucak-krizi-patladigindan-beri-erdogan-ve-putin-neler-soylediler?page=5>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Turkey not ‘lonely’ but dares to do so for its values and principles, says PM adviser,” *Hürriyet*, August 26, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-not-lonely-but-dares-to-do-so-for-its-values-and-principles-says-pm-adviser-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=53244&NewsCatID=338>.
- <sup>15</sup> Yıldırım Oğur, “Hayır diyebilen hatta jet düşürebilen Türkiye,” *Türkiye*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/yazarlar/yildiray-ogur/588965.aspx>.
- <sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of the operation in Turkish see Ahmet Kasım Han and Behlül Özkan, “Fırat Kalkanı Sünni Hilaline Döner mi?” *Birgün*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/firat-kalkani-sunni-hilaline-doner-mi-127729.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on agreed steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict, December 20, 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-the-russian-federation-and-the-republic-of-turkey-on-agreed-steps-to-revitalize-the-political-process-to-end-the-syrian-conflict-20-december-2016-moscow.en.mfa>.

