

Evaluating the Fighter Jet Crisis in Turkish-Russian Relations

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ABSTRACT *Turkey and Russia developed very close relations throughout the 2000s. Yet, their growing differences about the Syrian civil war dragged the two countries into a serious crisis on November 24, 2015, when the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet violating Turkey's airspace near the Syrian border. In the following seven months, political, economic and cultural links between the two countries were almost completely frozen within the framework of Russia's sanctions against Turkey. This article aims to discuss the impacts of the fighter jet crisis on Turkish-Russian relations. Although Ankara and Moscow normalized relations following President Erdoğan's letter to President Putin in June 2016, it is important to understand the main factors that led to the crisis in order to make sound predictions about the future of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement process.*

Introduction

Turkey and Russia enjoy more than five hundred years of diplomatic relations with each other. Yet, this long history has been dominated by rivalries and conflicts rather than cooperation and partnership. Since the 15th century, the geopolitical struggle between Ottoman sultans and Russian tsars over the Black Sea and the Balkans resulted in many Ottoman-Russian wars. Even the simultaneous collapse of the two empires during the First World War did not radically change the picture in the Turkish-Russian relations. Although the Soviet Union and the newly founded Republic of Turkey attempted to develop a strategic dialogue in the 1920s, this came to an abrupt end with the start of the Second World War. Stalin leadership's demand of territory in Eastern Anatolia as well as greater control in the Turkish Straits in the post-war period compelled Turkey to join NATO in 1952 and strategically align with the Western bloc during the Cold War. Still, particularly from 1960s onwards, Ankara and Moscow gradually improved their economic ties in the fields of trade, industry and energy despite political and ideological differences.

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In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union presented a unique opportunity to initiate a breakthrough in the Turkish-Russian relations. For the first time, mutual economic interests started to play a much more important role than military factors in shaping the relationship between the two countries.¹ During this period, rapidly increasing volumes of trade and other economic con-

siderations began to shape the course of their political dialogue, while a new concept of “multidimensional partnership” was introduced to define the new relations between Turkey and Russia.² Each country's problematic relationship with the West also played a crucial role in the evolution of cooperation with one another. This has been particularly true for Turkey, which has traditionally tended to strengthen links with Russia, whenever it confronted significant issues with its NATO allies. In the 2000s, as Turkish policymakers encountered new problems with the U.S. and EU, they started to perceive Russia as an important pole –and sometimes even an ally. Considering Moscow was also subject to sharp criticisms from the West during the same period, the Turkish-Russian rapprochement gained further momentum.³ In this regard, it is important to note that Turkey was the only NATO member state that refused to impose sanctions against Moscow following the crisis in Ukraine and the referendum in Crimea in 2014.

As relations between Turkey and Russia were steadily developing, the Arab uprisings started to sweep across the Middle East and North Africa. During this period, a closer relationship with Russia became even more important, particularly after Turkey began to confront serious conflicts with some of its Middle Eastern neighbors. Apart from the impacts of the massive humanitarian tragedy caused by the ongoing chaos in Syria, Ankara also felt threatened by the violent armed clashes taking place in its south in the form of civil wars and terrorist attacks. Moscow, on the other hand, viewed the developments in the Arab world mainly in the light of its global rivalry with the U.S. Russia's firm support to the Bashar Assad government during the Syrian civil war can only be understood within the framework of its global, regional and national threat and interest perceptions.⁴

In September 2015, Russia opened a new phase in its support for the Assad regime with direct airstrikes in Syria, primarily targeting the rebel groups supported by Turkey. In a matter of weeks, Turkish-Russian relations deteriorated rapidly due to the strengthened Russian military presence in the region. Eventually, on November 24, 2015, Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian SU-

24 fighter jet on the grounds that it was violating Turkey's airspace. Ankara carried the issue to the agenda of NATO, while Moscow harshly responded by declaring a series of economic sanctions against Turkey and accusing the government of helping the terrorist groups in Syria. As a result, political, economic and cultural ties between the two were decidedly frosty during the following seven months until President Erdoğan sent a letter of regret to President Putin in June 2016.

The aim of this article is to evaluate the impacts of the fighter jet crisis on Turkish-Russian relations. Although political and economic links between the two countries have significantly improved, particularly after the meeting between Erdoğan and Putin in St. Petersburg in August 2016, it should be emphasized this is also, in large part, due to the sharp deterioration of Ankara's relations with both the U.S. and EU in the wake of the July 2016 failed coup attempt. More importantly, despite the remarkably quick reconciliation process between Ankara and Moscow, the two countries have so far failed to resolve their differences regarding the regional conflicts not only in the Middle East, but also in the Black Sea and Caucasus.⁵ Their ongoing disagreements about the Syrian issue in particular still constitute the greatest challenge to the development of a genuine Turkish-Russian strategic partnership in the short term.

The Syrian Conundrum

Turkey has a long 911-kilometer land border with Syria. As the civil war in Syria escalated in early 2011, Turkey was confronted with a number of serious security issues originating from the chaos in this country. Apart from the threats posed by terrorist organizations such as the ISIS as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Ankara also suffered from the immense social and economic problems caused by more than three million people fleeing civil war and taking refuge in Turkey. Blaming the Assad government for the escalation of the crisis, Turkey offered support to opposition groups, along with some of the Western countries in the autumn of 2011. It also became a vocal critic of the Assad regime on the international stage and argued the issue could not be resolved as long as Assad remained in power. This approach inevitably created a rift between Ankara and Moscow, as the latter is one of the main supporters of the regime along with Iran.

Disagreements about Syria had already caused a number of problems between Turkey and Russia before the fighter jet crisis. For example, Turkey's request from NATO to deploy Patriot missiles near the Turkish-Syrian border was criticized by Moscow.⁶ The various international meetings held in Geneva, which brought together the warring parties in Syria, also failed to resolve the

Presidents Erdoğan and Putin shake hands after a joint press conference following their meeting in Ankara on September 28, 2017 where they agreed to push for the creation of a “de-escalation” zone in Syria’s province of Idlib to help end the civil war.

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ADEM ALTAN



significant differences between Turkey and Russia. The issue was even tackled at the High-Level Cooperation Council meeting held in Ankara in December 2014. Yet, while Putin praised Assad for a significant win in the elections in Syria in a joint press conference, Erdoğan reacted by saying “pro-coup leaders are elected by a high margin everywhere in the world.”⁷

Assad’s political future was not the only issue that caused friction between the two countries. There have also been disagreements regarding the fight against ISIS in the region. Although both countries stated several times that they viewed ISIS as a common threat, Russia objected to Turkey’s proposal to establish a “safe zone” for refugees and opposition groups in northern Syria and indicated this could only be possible after the issue was discussed in the UN Security Council.⁸ Moscow also criticized Turkey’s bombardment of the PKK camps in Iraq in July 2015 on similar grounds and emphasized once again that the Turkish action required UN Security Council approval.⁹

Despite their disagreements about Syria, it is important to note Turkey and Russia have also tried to maintain a degree of political dialogue with each other. This was particularly important in the quick resolution of the crisis that escalated following Turkey’s decision to force a passenger plane en route from Moscow to Damascus to land at the Esenboğa Airport in Ankara in October 2012. Although Turkish officials claimed the aircraft carried military equip-

ment to the Assad regime, Russia did not turn this into a major issue and the crisis was resolved in a matter of days through diplomatic channels between the two countries. Putin's official visit to Turkey shortly after this incident was also interpreted as a sign that relations were not upset by disagreements over Syria.¹⁰

The Syrian issue which was generally viewed as an indirect issue between the two countries between 2011-2015, started to cause serious friction after the beginning of Russian airstrikes in Syria

In fact, even the start of Russia's airstrikes in Syria on September 30, 2015 did not immediately interrupt the political dialogue between Ankara and Moscow. For example, only a week before the Russian military campaign began, Erdoğan joined the opening ceremony of the Cathedral Mosque in Moscow, while Putin visited Antalya in November 2015 to attend the G-20 summit, meeting many Turkish officials. Although the two governments again failed to reach an understanding about the Syrian conflict during these meetings, Putin said, in a press conference held only ten days before the downing of the Russian fighter jet, that Turkey and Russia had "common priorities" and the Syrian issue was not an obstacle for the improvement of bilateral relations.¹¹

It can be argued that two major factors have been decisive in the toughening of Turkey's criticisms against Russia's military presence in Syria. First, Turkey became extremely concerned about Russian jet assaults on Turkish-supported rebel groups rather than the ISIS targets.¹² Ankara even issued a joint statement together with the U.S., France, Germany, Qatar and Saudi Arabia condemning Russia's bombing of these groups as well as civilians in the region.¹³ Erdoğan also publicly criticized the Russian airstrikes, saying he could not understand the rationale of this military intervention given Russia does not share a border with Syria.¹⁴

A more important factor that resulted in alienation for Turkey was the issue of the Syrian Kurds. In July 2015, an attack by ISIS in Suruç near the Turkish-Syrian border that killed more than thirty people can be regarded as a turning point in this sense. Right after this incident, the PKK resumed attacks against the Turkish security forces following a three-year ceasefire. As armed clashes with the PKK escalated during the summer of 2015, Ankara voiced significant concerns internationally about the Democratic Union Party (PYD) –which is regarded as the most significant representative of the Syrian Kurds– as well as its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), claiming they were no more than an extension of the PKK. It also declared that the territorial advance of the YPG forces to the western part of the Euphrates River was a "red line," i.e. a major threat to Turkey's interests in the region.¹⁵

Despite Ankara's serious concerns about the PYD/YPG, Moscow continued to view the Kurds as an important actor in Syria as indicated by Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015.¹⁶ Ankara and Moscow's perceptions regarding the terrorist groups in Syria have also been quite different. For example, the Russian government has not included the PKK on its official list of terrorist organizations despite Turkey's requests. On the other hand, the PYD/YPG –deemed to be a terrorist organization by Ankara– has strengthened its official contacts with Russia and even opened an office in Moscow in February 2016. Yet, groups such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar ash-Sham have all been viewed as terrorist organizations by Russia. The issue of terrorism was also highlighted after the Russian jets targeted the Turkmen villages in the Bayırbucak region near the Turkish-Syrian border in early October 2015. Russia's bombing of the Turkmen groups –in the name of fighting terrorism in Syria– caused great unrest in Ankara.¹⁷

As also indicated by these developments, the Syrian issue which was generally viewed as an indirect issue between the two countries between 2011-2015, started to cause serious friction after the beginning of Russian airstrikes in Syria. Eventually, on October 3, 2015, Ankara warned Moscow when a Russian SU-30 fighter jet violated Turkish airspace. Only one day after this incursion, Turkish armed forces announced a Russian-made MIG-29 jet locked its radar for four and a half minutes onto Turkish jets patrolling the border. Following this new incident, Ankara warned Russia once again and took the issue to NATO to underline the degree of its sensitivity.¹⁸ It is worth noting, since 2012 Turkey had implemented a strict military engagement regime in its Syrian border. In fact, a Syrian helicopter violating Turkish airspace had been shot down in September 2013 within the framework of these new engagement rules. At that time, however, it was quite hard to imagine these same rules would soon become the source of a very serious crisis between Ankara and Moscow.

The Fighter Jet Crisis

On November 24, 2015, the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border on the grounds that it was violating Turkey's airspace. More importantly, one of the two Russian pilots was killed by gunfire as he parachuted to the ground –allegedly by Alparslan Çelik, a Turkish militant who was fighting along with the Syrian rebel groups in the region. Ankara announced that the Russian pilots were warned ten times in five minutes before the aircraft was finally shot down. The Turkish government also shared the radar images of the downed Russian jet as well as the voice recordings of the Turkish pilots with the international community.¹⁹ In the light of this evidence, NATO even issued a statement supporting Tur-

key's position following its emergency meeting in Brussels.

At the same time, however, President Erdoğan stated Turkey's intention was not hostile and it was discovered the fighter jet belonged to Russia only after it was downed by Turkish forces.²⁰ The same point was also made in the first official statement of the Turkish general staff who emphasized that "a warplane of unknown nationality has been intercepted on the grounds that it violated the Turkish airspace."²¹ In similar fashion, Prime Minister Davutoğlu expressed his regret for the incident and made considerable effort to ensure the return of the body of the pilot to Moscow.²²



The fighter jet crisis revealed disagreements about regional conflicts can very easily overshadow strong bilateral economic links between the two countries

However, such remarks and efforts failed to calm the reaction of the Russian government. Right before his meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah, Putin made his first statement about the issue and defined the downing of the Russian fighter jet as "a stab in the back delivered by terrorists' accomplices" –claiming the incident would have significant consequences for the Turkish-Russian relations.²³ Moscow also started to openly accuse Ankara of economically and logistically supporting ISIS by buying its oil and turning a blind eye to its militants crossing the Turkish-Syrian border.²⁴ Only a few days after the fighter jet incident, some satellite images and video recordings were made public in order to justify the Russian claims about the connections between Turkey and ISIS.²⁵

Moscow also requested an official apology from Ankara in addition to compensation to the Russian government. Turkey's leaders rejected these requests stating their right to protect national airspace.²⁶ In retaliation, the Kremlin imposed a series of economic sanctions. The order, approved by Putin, included a number of measures that restricted the import of Turkish agricultural products and consumer goods as well as the employment of Turkish citizens in Russian companies. In addition, Moscow called for the suspension of all charter flights from Russia to Turkey and requested Russian tourism companies to stop selling tour packages.²⁷ Russia's sanctions would come into effect from January 1, 2016. Only a few days before this deadline, however, Putin signed another order that extended the reach of the economic sanctions.²⁸ Within the framework of this new presidential order, a ban was imposed on the operations of several organizations under the jurisdiction of Turkey as well as limitations on Turkish organizations' activities in Russia. In a few weeks, Moscow also announced the reintroduction of visa restrictions for Turkish citizens who had been able to enjoy visa-free stays in Russia, for up to thirty days, since 2011.

In addition to the economic issues, the strained relations between Turkey and Russia also negatively affected geopolitical balances in three sub-regions of Eurasia: the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Black Sea

It can be argued this crisis between Ankara and Moscow escalated so rapidly as a result of the irreconcilable differences in the interests of the two countries concerning the Syrian issue. This was also revealed during the international meeting held in Vienna at the end of October 2015, where Ankara and Moscow once again defended completely opposite views regard-

ing Assad's future in Syria.²⁹ Additionally, it is worth noting in July 2015 Turkey permitted the US-led international coalition the use of its Incirlik airbase in the fight against ISIS –in the hope of convincing Washington to establish a safe zone between the towns of Azaz and Jarablus in northern Syria in return. However, this plan collapsed immediately after the fighter jet crisis as the advanced Russian S-400 air defense missile system, deployed in the Khmeymim airbase in Latakia, virtually closed all Syrian airspace to Turkish jets. Eventually, Ankara was forced to stop air support to the US-led international coalition.³⁰

Political and Economic Implications

The fighter jet crisis discredited the bold claims about the emergence of a strategic partnership between Turkey and Russia voiced only a few years before by both Turkish and Russian officials.³¹ It also revealed disagreements about regional conflicts can very easily overshadow strong bilateral economic links between the two countries. In fact, it is estimated Russia's sanctions caused an immediate loss of between \$9-11 billion to the Turkish economy.³² The sanctions also significantly reduced Turkish-Russian trade volume, already in decline at \$24 billion by the end of 2015 as a result of Russia's own economic problems. In the first six months of 2016, the trade volume shrank further to \$8 billion. The number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey, on the other hand, decreased by 87 percent during the same period.³³

Another important concern for the Turkish policymakers was the heavy dependence on Russian energy imports. At the time, Russia supplied almost 55 percent of Turkey's natural gas and the country's first nuclear power plant was under construction by Russian state-owned corporation Rosatom. Since nearly half of the electricity consumed in Turkey has been produced by natural gas, the government was particularly concerned Russia could cut the gas supply to retaliate for the downing of its fighter jet.³⁴ It was also reported by the Turkish press that the construction of the \$22 billion Akkuyu nuclear power plant



The Turkish, Russian and Iranian Ministers of Foreign Affairs (R to L) Çavuşoğlu, Lavrov and Zarif, hold a joint press conference following the trilateral talks on the incidents in Aleppo, in Moscow on December 20, 2016.

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was deliberately slowed down by the Russian authorities following the crisis.³⁵ More importantly, the major Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline, officially announced during Putin's visit to Ankara in December 2014 and destined to supply Russian natural gas to Europe, was suspended following Russia's economic sanctions.³⁶

In addition to the economic issues, the strained relations between Turkey and Russia also negatively affected geopolitical balances in three sub-regions of Eurasia: the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Black Sea. The Middle East, in particular, immediately turned into a theater of confrontation. Apart from preventing Turkish jets entering Syrian airspace and rapidly strengthening its political and military ties with Syrian Kurds, Moscow also provided strong support for the Iraqi government which officially requested Turkey to withdraw its military forces from the Bashiqa camp near Mosul.³⁷ The Turkish military had been present in the region for almost two and a half years in agreement with the U.S.-led international coalition as well as the Baghdad government and provided training to the Iraqi Kurdish forces against ISIS. Moscow also continued to strengthen its strategic rapprochement with Ankara's main regional rival Tehran, while improving its political, economic and military relations with the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi government in Egypt, the legitimacy of which has been rejected by Ankara.³⁸

The antagonism between Turkey and Russia also had significant geopolitical implications for the Caucasus. One of Moscow's first moves was to strengthen

its military presence in Armenia with the signing of a collective Russian-Armenian security deal for a united regional air defense system.³⁹ More importantly, the sudden escalation of the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the latter's breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh once again confirmed Russia's status as the region's main power broker. This development was also regarded by some analysts as Moscow's signal to the Azerbaijani leaders that they should be careful about their special relationship with Ankara.⁴⁰ The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan is best represented by grand energy transportation projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline as well as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) –expected to become operational in 2018.

Although the Black Sea has generally been viewed as a region of dialogue and cooperation in Turkish-Russian relations in the post-Cold War period, it has been negatively influenced by the fighter jet crisis. For instance, the growing rift with Russia resulted in Turkish leaders' open support for NATO's plans to deploy a permanent naval force in the Black Sea –mainly in response to Russia's increased military presence in Crimea.⁴¹ Turkey also continued to develop its political and military relations with Ukraine, sharply criticized Moscow's treatment of the Tatars in Crimea and supported Georgia's bid to join NATO. Russia's response to these developments was to strengthen its military relations with Georgia's two breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴²

The social and cultural relations between Turkey and Russia were also damaged. Strong anti-Turkish rhetoric dominated Russian media and was met by the rise of anti-Russian sentiments in Turkey. In January 2016, an opinion poll conducted by a Turkish university revealed 65 percent of the respondents believed that Russia had become the number-one threat to Turkey.⁴³ This was, perhaps, unsurprising considering the difficulties caused by the sanctions for Turkish workers, businessmen and students were reported extensively by the Turkish media. The Russian government also cancelled most of the cultural and academic cooperation agreements signed between the two countries. As a result, particularly after Moscow's decision to suspend the visa-free travel regime with Turkey, it was reported almost ten thousand Turkish citizens left Russia.⁴⁴

Reconciliation Process

It can be argued both economic and geopolitical considerations have influenced Ankara and Moscow's decision to normalize relations. In Turkey's case, the fight against ISIS and the PKK became the most critical factor as their attacks against the Turkish security forces and civilians intensified during the

2015-2016 period. Reconciliation with Moscow, in this sense, became an imperative for Ankara in order to take cross-border security measures in northern Syria. Russia, on the other hand, required the cooperation of Turkey as an important regional actor to secure its long-term interests in the Middle East and Black Sea following its costly interventions in Ukraine and Syria. Ankara and Washington's disagreements due to the increased U.S. support to the YPG forces in Syria also provided Moscow with the opportunity to exploit the growing rift between the NATO allies.

That Ankara decided to move closer to the Russian-Iranian axis in Syria mainly because these two countries have repeatedly emphasized the territorial integrity of Syria

The normalization process in the Turkish-Russian relations officially began with President Erdoğan's letter of regret to President Putin on June 27, 2016.⁴⁵ The letter was warmly welcomed by Moscow and the two leaders were to meet in St. Petersburg in August. Yet, the coup attempt that took place in Turkey on July 15 suddenly gave new meaning to the Turkish-Russian normalization process. Both Moscow and Tehran expressed strong support for the Turkish government, while the official reactions of Turkey's NATO allies were unexpectedly hesitant and mixed.⁴⁶ This created disappointment in Ankara about its relations with the U.S. and EU, providing real impetus to the Turkish-Russian reconciliation.

Only a few weeks after the coup attempt, Erdoğan and Putin finally came together for the first time since the fighter jet crisis on August 9, 2016, restoring bilateral ties in the fields of trade, energy and tourism. In the following months, the two leaders met a number of times and spoke frequently on the phone –particularly regarding the situation in Syria. During Putin's visit to İstanbul in October 2016, they also signed the intergovernmental agreement for the construction of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline which is expected to supply large amounts of Russian natural gas to Turkey by the end of 2019.⁴⁷ In addition, Turkey and Russia confirmed their commitment to finish the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. To this end, the Turkish government even agreed to assign a "strategic investment" status to the Akkuyu project.⁴⁸ Ankara also expressed its interest in purchasing Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system in order to develop its own national missile defense despite the concerns of the NATO officials.⁴⁹ Following months of negotiations, Erdoğan finally announced the S-400 deal was signed and an initial payment was made to Moscow for the purchase.⁵⁰

Regarding Syria, on the other hand, Turkey and Russia agreed to establish a special mechanism for enhanced consultations between the two countries'

It is quite remarkable that Ankara and Moscow achieved to repair the damage in their bilateral relations so rapidly and resumed their strategic dialogue in such a short period of time

foreign ministry, intelligence and general staff officials.⁵¹ One of the main outcomes of this strengthened military dialogue was Ankara's launch of the "Operation Euphrates Shield" in August 2016 in cooperation with Free Syrian Army (FSA) units to liberate the region extending from Azaz to Jarablus in northern Syria from ISIS and YPG forces.⁵² The possibility of the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria became more likely that same month, when the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which the YPG played a leading role, liberated the town of Manbij in the west of the Euphrates River. Ankara was alarmed by this development not only due to the enhanced level of military cooperation between the U.S. and YPG forces, but also because the latter came very close to achieving its goal to unify the three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria –Jazira, Kobani and Afrin.

It can be argued, in this regard, that Ankara decided to move closer to the Russian-Iranian axis in Syria mainly because these two countries have repeatedly emphasized the territorial integrity of Syria. Although the Kremlin has also developed closer relations with the Syrian Kurds in the last few years, the initiation of the Turkish-Russian reconciliation process as well as developing military links between Washington and the YPG have influenced Russia's perceptions about this issue. The Turkish government's alienation from the U.S. following the coup attempt has also played an important role in this picture. Apart from the reluctance of U.S. authorities to extradite Fetullah Gülen, believed to be the mastermind of the coup attempt, Washington's increasing military support to the YPG forces have eventually urged Ankara to seek the partnership of Moscow and Tehran on the Syrian issue.⁵³

Turkey's enhanced cooperation with Russia and Iran in Syria produced significant results in a remarkably short period. Above all, this cooperation has enabled Ankara to achieve the two major objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield: preventing the unification of the three Kurdish cantons and purging ISIS militants from northern Syria. In fact, Turkish forces' capture of the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab in March 2017 was facilitated with the active support of the Russian fighter jets. The Turkish-Russian dialogue has also been crucial for ending the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo, under siege by the forces of Assad and Russia in late 2016, and especially for evacuating thousands of civilians



from the city. Regarding this issue, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov even said that the talks with Ankara proved to be much more effective than months of “fruitless talking shop” with Washington.⁵⁴

At the same time, however, the massive civilian casualties caused by Russia and Assad regime’s joint operation on Aleppo triggered huge reactions against Moscow in the Turkish public. It should be noted in this regard that the Russian ambassador Andrey Karlov was killed in Ankara in December 2016 during his visit to an art exhibit by an off-duty Turkish police officer who yelled, “Don’t forget Aleppo, don’t forget Syria.” Although the incident remains under investigation by Turkish and Russian officials, it has been claimed the perpetrators actually aimed to make use of rising anti-Russian sentiments in Turkey to undermine the reconciliation process between the two countries.⁵⁵ Despite this, it should be emphasized that Ankara and Moscow preferred to act in close communication with each other after the incident and jointly condemned the attack as an “act of terror.”⁵⁶

More importantly, only one day after the assassination of Ambassador Karlov the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Iran came together in Moscow to sign a declaration for a comprehensive ceasefire and eventual peace agreement in Syria. The document particularly emphasized Syria’s territorial

Foreign Minister of Turkey Çavuşoğlu and Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov lay flowers at a portrait of the murdered Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, in Moscow on December 20, 2016.

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The main challenge before Ankara and Moscow in the long term, therefore, will be to build a genuine strategic partnership in which they can continue developing their political and economic relations while constructively addressing their significant differences over regional issues

integrity and designated al-Nusra Front –which later changed its name to Fatah al-Sham– and ISIS as the two terrorist groups to be excluded from the new ceasefire process in Syria. Although the Moscow Declaration was perceived by some in Turkey as a major concession to Russia and Iran, mainly because it signified Ankara's abandonment of its previously declared goal of removing Assad from power, the first round of talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups was held in January 2017 in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan –a country that enjoys close relations with both Russia and Turkey.⁵⁷

It should be emphasized the U.S., which has been present as a main actor at the negotiation table in almost all of the previous peace efforts about Syria, has been largely sidelined by Turkey, Russia and Iran in the newly started Astana process.⁵⁸ In May 2017, for instance, the three countries agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria in which the hostilities between the government forces and armed

opposition groups would be halted for six months with the goal of facilitating humanitarian assistance, the return of displaced civilians and restoration of damaged infrastructure.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The latest developments in Syria as well as emerging problems between Turkey and its NATO allies have resulted in some analysts referencing a new shift of axis towards Russia and Iran in Turkish foreign policy.⁶⁰ Although it may be a little too early to make such assessments, it is nevertheless quite remarkable that Ankara and Moscow achieved to repair the damage in their bilateral relations so rapidly and resumed their strategic dialogue in such a short period of time.

Yet, it seems taking the Turkish-Russian relations back to their advanced level of the pre-crisis period will take much more time and effort. It is true that Ankara and Moscow have strengthened economic cooperation through large-scale investment projects, including the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the Turkish Stream pipeline. They also very recently finalized the agreement for the sale of the Russian S-400 missile system to Turkey. On the other hand, it should be noted that Moscow has refused to lift the ban on the import of the

Turkish tomatoes, one of Turkey's most important export items pre-crisis. The Putin administration is also reluctant to reintroduce the visa-free travel regime to the Turkish citizens –often citing the security problems in Turkey.⁶¹

More importantly, the two countries still need to reach a final deal about difficult issues in Syria such as the future of Assad as well as Russia's relations with the Syrian Kurds. The latter in particular could become a major problem for Turkey considering Russia holds some of its military forces in the Afrin canton and continues its political and military dialogue with the PYD/YPG in an effort to counter U.S. influence in the region. Moscow has also actively lobbied for the inclusion of the PYD/YPG representatives in the ongoing Syria peace talks in Geneva and Astana.⁶²

Apart from the Syrian crisis, the significant disagreements between Turkey and Russia with regard to some of the most important regional issues in the Black Sea and the Caucasus are far from being resolved. The Turkish government remains concerned about the situation in Ukraine, protection of the rights of the Crimean Tatars and the growing Russian military presence in the Black Sea. Ankara also continues to develop a trilateral strategic rapprochement with Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus. Russia, on the other hand, has been strengthening its political and military relations with Armenia.⁶³

Yet, despite these ongoing differences, the continuation of the Turkish-Russian dialogue is very important in order to achieve a degree of stability in their shared neighborhood. As indicated by the latest discussions around the S-400 deal, the two countries also intend to use their rapprochement with each other as an effective political leverage in their relations with the U.S. and EU. The main challenge before Ankara and Moscow in the long term, therefore, will be to build a genuine strategic partnership in which they can continue developing their political and economic relations while constructively addressing their significant differences over regional issues. ■

Endnotes

1. For an overview of the economic relations between the two countries, see "Rossiysko-Turetskie Ekonomicheskie Otnosheniya na Novom Etape," *RIAC*, (2016).

2. For a number of studies that explore the development of Turkish-Russian relations in the post-Cold War era, see Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül (eds.), *Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler: Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017); Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000), pp. 59-82; Şener Aktürk, "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2006), pp. 337-364; Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2006), pp. 81-92; Emre Erşen, "Turkish-Russian Relations in the New Century," in Özden Zeynep Oktav (ed.), *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy*, (Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 95-114; Mitat Çelikpala, "Rekabet ve İşbirliği İkileminde Yönünü Arayan Türk-Rus İlişkileri," *Bilig*, No. 72 (2015), pp. 117-144; and Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and

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