

# The Turkish-Russian Reconciliation Process: The Implications For The Middle East

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**Abstract:** Throughout the 2000s, Turkey and Russia developed very close political and economic links. Both sides tried to maintain good relations even after the Arab uprisings and despite their growing differences over the Syrian civil war, but this became an impossible task after November 24, 2015, when Turkish forces shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border. This incident not only caused a rupture in bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow, but also brought an abrupt end to regional dialogue between the two countries with regard to developments in the Middle East.

On August 9, President Erdoğan and President Putin met in St. Petersburg for the first time since the fighter jet incident and announced a normalization of political and economic relations between Turkey and Russia. The two countries also announced their decision to establish a new political-military mechanism to help overcome their differences over Syria.

If Turkey manages to overcome its differences with Russia and Iran over Syria, this might also pave the way for the emergence of a regional consensus between the three countries regarding other issues in the Middle East.

## Introduction

Although neither Turkey nor Russia played a prominent role in the Middle East in the 1990s due to their domestic political and economic problems, the following decade was a completely different story for both countries. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Moscow reversed previous Russian governments' passive stances towards the Middle East and significantly improved strategic relations with many of the countries of the region.<sup>1</sup> In a similar manner, the Turkish government under the Justice and Development Party treated the Middle East as a priority in foreign policy and developed close political, economic and cultural links with the region.<sup>2</sup>

From the 2000s onwards, Middle Eastern issues also started to dominate the agenda of Turkish-Russian relations as well as these countries' bilateral relations with the US and EU. In 2003, for example, the Turkish parliament's rejection of a motion permitting the participation of Turkish troops in the US-led war in Iraq was a significant development that initiated a strategic rapprochement between Turkey and Russia.

During the same period, Ankara and Moscow's positions on other major issues in the Middle East largely converged as well. For example, Syria's Bashar Assad and Palestine's Hamas, which were both isolated by Western governments, relied on the support of Turkey and Russia. Similarly, both Ankara and Moscow advocated a more constructive dialogue with Tehran regarding its nuclear program at a time when US and EU officials were requesting harsh sanctions against the Iranian government. Turkey also supported Russia's entrance into the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC – now Organization of Islamic Cooperation) as an observer state in 2005.

The Arab uprisings that began in 2010 presented the first real challenge to the Turkish-Russian convergence of interests in the Middle East. For example, when Ankara, despite its initial reservations, decided to join its NATO allies in the Libya campaign, Putin harshly condemned the Western intervention – likening it to a “crusade”.<sup>3</sup> Turkey also permitted the stationing of the early warning radar belonging to NATO’s missile defense system on its territory in 2012 despite the reactions of Russia and Iran. However, the main issue that brought about the end of Turkish-Russian dialogue over the Middle East has been the Syrian civil war.

### **Crisis in Syria**

In the fall of 2011, Turkey significantly changed its policy towards the Syrian civil war. Instead of trying to convince Assad to carry out reforms, the Turkish government started to actively support opposition groups together with Western governments. Disappointed with the Assad regime’s firm resistance to any kind of change in Syria, Ankara soon became the most vocal critic of Damascus in international platforms – often insisting that the Syrian issue could not be resolved as long as Assad remained in power. This approach inevitably created a rift between Ankara and Moscow, since Russia, together with Iran, had become one of the main supporters of the Assad regime during the course of the Syrian civil war.

The Syrian issue started to cause direct friction between Turkey and Russia after Moscow began carrying out airstrikes in Syria from September 30, 2015 onward. President Erdoğan, for example, harshly criticized the Russian campaign and said he could not understand the rationale for this intervention, as Russia did not even have a common land border with Syria.<sup>4</sup> In a matter of days, Turkish-Russian relations deteriorated rapidly due to the strengthened Russian military presence in the region. On

October 3, Ankara warned Moscow, claiming that a Russian SU-30 fighter jet had violated Turkish airspace. Only one day after this incursion, Turkish armed forces announced that a Russian-made MIG-29 jet had locked its radar for four and a half minutes onto Turkish jets patrolling the border.<sup>5</sup>

Two factors have been particularly important in the toughening of Turkey’s criticisms of Russia’s operations in Syria. Firstly, Turkey became extremely concerned about the assaults of Russian jets on Turkish-supported opposition groups rather than ISIL targets.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Russia’s improving relations with the Syrian Kurds – especially the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara simply views as an extension of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Syria – has further complicated relations with Moscow.

Against this backdrop, the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet on November 24 on the grounds that it was violating Turkey’s airspace. At the same time, one of the Russian pilots was allegedly killed by gunfire emanating from Syrian rebel groups as he parachuted to the ground. Turkey immediately carried the issue to the agenda of NATO and refused to apologize for its actions, while Russia harshly responded by declaring large-scale economic sanctions against Turkey and accusing the Turkish government with assisting ISIL and other terrorist groups in Syria.

The fighter jet crisis turned the Middle East into a new theatre of confrontation between Turkey and Russia over the next seven months. Moscow deployed its advanced S-400 air defense system in its newly acquired Khmeimim airbase in Syria and virtually closed Syrian airspace to Turkish jets. As a result, Turkey had to stop the air support it has been giving to the US-led international coalition against ISIL.



Russia also provided strong backing to the claims of the Iraqi government, which officially requested that Turkey withdraw its military forces from the Bashiqa camp near Mosul.<sup>7</sup> This was quite remarkable given that the Turkish military had been present in the region for almost two and a half years in agreement with the US-led international coalition as well as the Iraqi government in order to provide training to the Iraqi Kurdish forces against ISIL.

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In addition, Moscow continued to improve its political, economic and military relations with the Sisi government in Egypt, which had significant problems with Turkey. It also continued to increase its military presence in the region and entered into a new dialogue with the US regarding the Syrian peace process. Therefore, as of early 2016 it became increasingly harder for Ankara to play a meaningful role over the Syrian issue without solving its problems with Moscow.

#### **St. Petersburg Summit**

Strategic relations between Turkey and Russia were completely frozen until June 27, when it was announced that President Erdoğan had written a letter of regret to Putin and expressed his willingness to begin a process of normalization.<sup>8</sup> The two leaders finally met in St. Petersburg on August 9, almost two weeks after the failed coup attempt which took place in Turkey. Putin's outright support for the democratically-elected Turkish government against the coup attempt was genuinely appreciated by Ankara, especially at a time when the responses coming from the US and EU were much more hesitant and critical of the Turkish government.

Although the agenda of the St. Petersburg meeting was shaped by the desire of both governments to improve economic relations, the so-called Turkish-Russian "reset" also has a powerful regional dimension which should make a significant impact on the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> This is also indicated by the joint decision to hold a second meeting in St. Petersburg separately to discuss the issue of Syria.

Another meeting took place in Russia on August 11 between foreign ministry and intelligence officials and general staff officers. This newly established three-pillar mechanism is expected to bridge the divide between Turkey and Russia's policies in Syria. In particular, one major objective appears to be preventing the emergence of another crisis between the two countries' air forces over the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>10</sup> It should also be indicated that Turkey took the decision to harmonize its military engagement rules with NATO in June – making them more flexible in order to avoid a new confrontation with Russia. This means that a direct military conflict between Ankara and Moscow over Syria has become quite unlikely.

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Yet, the two countries still have significant disagreements on many issues, including the role to be played by Assad in the Syrian transitional government as well as the future of Russia's relations with PYD/YPG. The Syrian Kurds, for instance, opened an office in Moscow last February. In addition, Russia wants Turkey to effectively control – and even close – its border with Syria in



order to stop the flow of militants and arms.<sup>11</sup> Another point of contention between the two countries is which groups in Syria should be designated as terrorists. Russia, for instance, regards Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham—which are supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar—as terrorist groups, whereas Turkey claims that PYD/YPG has major links with the PKK terrorists on its own soil.

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#### **A New Regional Framework?**

Despite these differences, Turkish authorities are optimistic that a degree of understanding can be achieved with Russia in the short term. Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Kalın, for instance, has emphasized that there is a general consensus between Ankara and Moscow regarding the necessity for a transitional period in Syria as well as the cessation of hostilities and protection of the country's territorial integrity.<sup>12</sup> Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, on the other hand, has indicated that the fight against ISIL can be used as a common ground for bringing all parties together in Syria. Turkey's decision to resume its air operations against ISIL in the wake of the new rapprochement with Russia is quite significant in this regard.<sup>13</sup>

Hints of Turkey's new outlook toward its relationship with Russia can also be found in President Erdoğan's interview with a Russian news agency. Shifting significantly from his previous position on Russia's role in Syria, he referred to Russia as the "key and most important player in establishing peace in Syria."<sup>14</sup> He also expressed Turkey's desire to introduce a regional framework for the peace process. The Turkish president believes in this

regard that regional actors including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar should play a more prominent role in solving the crisis in Syria. Such a platform could also help ease the tensions between Tehran and Riyadh in the Middle East.

Turkey has also been in the process of a new political dialogue with Iran since last year. Apart from improvements in economic relations between the two countries, Tehran also stood firmly against the coup attempt in Turkey. More importantly, the official visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Zharif to Ankara only a few days after the Erdoğan-Putin summit in St. Petersburg signals the inclusion of Iran as a main actor in the emerging regional dialogue between Turkey and Russia.

It should also be indicated in this regard that last week, Russian jets used Iran's Hamadan airbase for the first time to strike a number of targets in Syria. This development should be considered together with Russian policymakers' latest remarks about the possibility of making a similar deal with Turkey to use its airbase at Incirlik – which is currently also used by the US-led coalition in the fight against ISIL.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, it is still too early to talk about such a possibility, since Moscow may as well be using the Incirlik debate as conscious propaganda to drive a further wedge between Turkey and the West.<sup>16</sup>

It is also interesting to note that even Israel may have a role to play in the quest for a new regional framework in the Middle East. Just as Erdoğan's letter initiated a breakthrough in Turkish-Russian relations in late June, Turkey signed an important agreement with Israel in order to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries after a six-year gap.<sup>17</sup> Considering that Russia's relations with Israel have also improved significantly over the last few years, it is very likely that Tel Aviv will support the continuation of regional



dialogue between Ankara and Moscow in the Middle East.

### Conclusion

Although the St. Petersburg meeting between Putin and Erdoğan seems to have achieved its aim of reviving regional dialogue between Turkey and Russia, it is too early to predict whether this new process will solve all the differences between the two countries, and particularly those over Syria. It seems that Ankara and Moscow will first need to reach an understanding on thorny issues including the future of Assad and Moscow's relations with the PYD/YPG before they can proceed with a new framework to solving the Syrian crisis. The next Putin-Erdoğan meeting, which is expected to take place within the framework of the G-20 summit in China in September, will be quite important in this regard.

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Yet, it should be indicated that the Turkish-Russian rapprochement process is still a very important development for the Middle East, as it may contribute to the emergence of a potential regional consensus for the solution of the Syrian issue. Russia, which has been a pivotal actor in Syria since last year, is already developing strategic relations with Iran, Egypt and Israel and maintaining a remarkable degree of political dialogue with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is also currently working very closely with the US in order to sustain the fragile peace process in Syria.

Turkey has also been striving to normalize its relations with Israel, Iran and Iraq within the framework of a new policy called "more friends and fewer enemies".<sup>18</sup> Although both the Turkish government and public are currently very much disappointed with the attitude of EU and US officials regarding the failed coup attempt, Ankara still continues to closely cooperate with its NATO allies in the fight against ISIL. Consequently, US Vice-President Joe Biden's upcoming visit to Turkey in August should be expected to help mend ties between Ankara and Washington.

It is true that some circles in Turkey and abroad perceive the recent Turkish-Russian rapprochement as a challenge to the West, since both countries currently have significant problems in their relations with the US and EU. Yet, it should be indicated that both Ankara and Moscow are also aware that they need to work together with Western countries in order to find a lasting solution to the Syrian crisis. Therefore, instead of interpreting the Turkish-Russian reconciliation as the sign of a new shift of axis in Turkish foreign policy, one should rather consider the normalization of relations between Turkey and Russia as an integral part of a greater regional framework in the Middle East, which not only includes the countries of the region, but also the US and EU.





**Endnotes:**

- 1- For an overview of Putin's foreign policy in the region, see Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East Under Putin," Ortadoğu Etütleri, Volume 2, No 3, July 2010, pp. 9-55.
- 2- For an analysis of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East in the 2000s, see Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.
- 3- Pravda.ru, March 21, 2011, <http://www.pravda.ru/news/world/21-03-2011/1070915-putin-o>.
- 4- Hürriyet, October 2, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/rusya-nicin-bu-ise-bu-kadar-ilgi-duyuy-or-30220481>.
- 5- For a summary of Turkey's claims regarding Russia's incursions into Turkish airspace see TRT World, December 27, 2015, <http://interactive.trt-world.com/highlights-of-2015/ajax/infographics/infographico8.jpg>.
- 6- The Turkish Defence Minister, for instance, claimed that 88 percent of total Russian air operations in Syria were directed against the opposition groups. Yeni Şafak, February 16, 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/rusya-7-bin-200-hava-saldirisi-duzenledi-2415461>.
- 7- See TRT World, December 8, 2015, <http://www.trtworld.com/europe/russia-asks-un-to-discuss-turkeys-actions-in-syria-iraq-12324>.
- 8- <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>.
- 9- Also see Dimitar Bechev, "What's behind the Turkey-Russia Reset?" Aljazeera, August 9, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/08/turkey-russia-reset-160808103350290.html>
- 10- SputnikTurkey, August 12, 2016, <http://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/20160812/1024349236/turk-rus-uclu-mekanizma-oncelik-suriye.html>.
- 11- According to Russian newspaper Izvestia, this issue was brought up again by Russian officials at the first meeting of the newly established Turkish-Russian commission. See Izvestia, August 12, 2016, <http://izvestia.ru/news/626680> and Sputnik News, August 12, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20160812/1044194779/russia-turkey-syria-border-closure.html>.
- 12- Hürriyet, August 10, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-kalin-can-li-yayinda-konustu-40188043>.

- 13- Hürriyet Daily News, August 11, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-back-in-anti-isil-strikes-after-russia-deal>.
- 14- "Erdogan Exclusive: New Page in Russia-Turkey Relations," TASS, August 9, 2016, <http://tass.ru/en/world/893204><http://tass.ru/en/world/893204>.
- 15- Sputnik News, August 16, 2016. <http://sputniknews.com/military/20160816/1044330202/turkey-russia-incirlik.html>.
- 16- BBC Türkçe, August 19, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-37127569>.
- 17- See Hasan Kösebalaban, "Towards a New Strategic Alliance between Turkey and Israel," Al Sharq Forum Expert Brief, August 10, 2016, <http://www.sharqforum.org/2016/08/10/towards-a-new-strategic-alliance-between-turkey-and-israel>.
- 18- See Hürriyet Daily News, May 24, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/new-pm-signals-shift-in-foreign-policy-more-friends-than-enemies.aspx?page-ID=238&nID=99616&NewsCatID=338>.



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