

THE TURKISH- RUSSIAN DIALOGUE IN SYRIA

PROSPECTS AND
CHALLENGES

Emre ERŞEN



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Abstract: Following its reconciliation with Russia after a seven-month crisis in bilateral relations, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 to fight ISIS and PYD/YPG forces in Syria. The subsequent intensified regional dialogue between Turkey, Russia and Iran resulted in the Moscow Declaration, which signifies the start of a new process aimed at the resolution of the Syrian issue. Although Ankara succeeded in establishing an ISIS and PYD/YPG-free zone in northern Syria within a few months as a result of its close political and military dialogue with Russia, the two countries still need to overcome a number of significant challenges in order to continue their regional cooperation in the short term.

Turkey's reservations regarding the role to be played by Assad in the political future of Syria as well as its deep concerns about rising Iranian influence in the Middle East indicate that Turkish-Russian dialogue may be undermined by third parties. Rising anti-Russian sentiments among the Turkish public following the crisis in Aleppo have also demonstrated the limits of a genuine rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. Although the two countries are currently striving to strengthen their regional dialogue following the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara, the volatile geopolitical balance in Syria as well as the constantly shifting positions of the other global and regional powers and non-state actors are likely to have a significant impact on the development of Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria.



Introduction

On September 30, 2015, Russia opened a new phase in its support for the Assad regime by beginning direct airstrikes in Syria. Little more than a year after this intervention, it has managed to turn itself into one of the major actors in the Middle East, filling the geopolitical void created by reluctant and inconsistent US foreign policy towards Syria. In this context, the Kremlin has not only enabled the Assad government to get a significant edge over rebel factions, but has also acquired a new military airbase in Latakia, begun to modernize its Soviet-era naval facility in Tartus and boosted its diplomatic influence at international talks on the resolution of the Syrian issue.

At the same time, however, the Russian military intervention in Syria caused a serious rupture in Moscow's relations with Ankara. Although Turkey and Russia have aimed to develop political and economic ties independently from their sharp disagreements about the Syrian crisis, this became an almost impossible task after November 24, 2015, when the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border on the grounds that it was violating Turkey's airspace. Strategic relations, which were very cautiously strengthened by the two governments throughout the 2000s, suffered a major setback as a result of this incident.

Following the fighter jet crisis with Turkey, Russia continued to increase its military presence in Syria and closed Syrian airspace to Turkish jets using its S-400 air defense missile system deployed at the Khmeimim base in Latakia. Moscow also began to improve its political and military relations with the Syrian Kurds – most notably the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing People's Protection Units (YPG), which are both viewed by Ankara as the extension of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It also tried hard to exclude Turkey from the Syrian peace process and launched extensive anti-Turkish propaganda operations claiming that Ankara had been supporting ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria.

While its political and economic relations with Russia were frozen for almost seven months, Turkey continued to struggle with terrorist groups like the PKK, whose attacks against Turkish security forces and civilians have intensified since the summer of 2015, and ISIS. Ankara eventually felt obliged to normalize its relations with Moscow in order to take cross-border security measures against these two groups in Syria.

The diplomatic process between Turkey and Russia that started with President Erdoğan's letter of regret to President Putin in June 2016 gained greater momentum after the two leaders met in St. Petersburg on August 9.¹ The Putin-Erdoğan summit, which took place only a few weeks after the failed July 15 coup attempt in Turkey, did not only facilitate a reconciliation process for Turkish-Russian political and economic relations, but also initiated a new regional rapprochement between the two countries regarding their divergent policies toward the Syrian crisis.



Turkish-Russian Reconciliation and Syria

One of the most important decisions taken by Putin and Erdoğan in their meeting in St. Petersburg was the establishment of a three-pillar mechanism based on enhanced consultations between the two countries' foreign ministries, intelligence agencies and general staff units.² Apart from strengthening communication to prevent the emergence of another military confrontation between Turkish and Russian forces in Syria, this new initiative, the first meeting of which was held in Russia on August 11, 2016, aimed to develop a much more extensive political and military dialogue between Ankara and Moscow than in the pre-fighter jet crisis period.

The Russian military intervention in Syria caused a serious rupture in Moscow's relations with Ankara. Although Turkey and Russia have aimed to develop political and economic ties independently from their sharp disagreements about the Syrian crisis, this became an almost impossible task after November 24, 2015, when the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter jet near the Turkish-Syrian border on the grounds that it was violating Turkey's airspace.

In addition to the newly established three-pillar mechanism, another significant dimension of this strengthened regional dialogue between Turkey and Russia in Syria was the inclusion of Iran in this process. The day before his meeting with Erdoğan in St. Petersburg, Putin met with President Rouhani in Baku, while the Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif visited Ankara on August 12. A week later, this time the Turkish foreign minister went to Tehran for an official visit. Moscow and Tehran's clear support for the Turkish government during the failed coup attempt of July 15, in contrast to the muted

reactions of the US and EU officials, also contributed to the regional rapprochement between the three countries.

After the St. Petersburg summit, Putin and Erdoğan met twice more in person and spoke many times on the phone to discuss the situation in Syria. Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım also made a significant visit to Moscow in December 2016. Putin's visit to Turkey in October was particularly important, as the two governments signed the agreement for the construction of the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline, which is expected to carry significant amounts of Russian natural gas to Europe via Turkey. This project had been previously suspended by Ankara in reaction to Russia's economic sanctions against Turkey following the fighter jet crisis.³

Turkish-Russian relations have also continued to develop in the military sphere. For instance, Ankara has announced its interest in buying the Russian S-400 missile system to strengthen its national air defense.⁴ The two countries also agreed to establish a direct military hotline during Russian Chief of General Staff Gerasimov's visit to Turkey in September 2016. In November, Turkish Chief of General Staff Akar visited Moscow for consultations with his Russian colleagues. One of the main outcomes of this close military dialogue has been Ankara's launch of "Operation Euphrates Shield" on August 24 in cooperation with Free Syrian Army (FSA) units to liberate the region extending from Azaz to Jarablus in northern Syria from ISIS and PYD/YPG forces.

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Russia and Operation Euphrates Shield

The rapid rapprochement between Turkey and Russia has been one of the main reasons for the achievement of the short-term objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield.⁷ Ankara's close military dialogue with Moscow was particularly important for the liberation of strategic towns like Jarablus and Dabiq from ISIS. It was also quite remarkable since Russian officials, who had voiced very serious criticisms and allegations against Turkey only a few months earlier, kept their reactions to Operation Euphrates Shield very low-key.

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Although the Kremlin expressed its discontent with the Turkish military operation in northern Syria mainly because it was not launched with the approval of the Assad regime or the UN Security Council, many Russian leaders including Putin also stated that they understood Turkey's security concerns stemming from the volatile situation in Syria.⁵ At the same time, however, they officially requested Ankara to conduct the operation in coordination with the Assad government, which is regarded by Moscow and Tehran as the only legitimate authority in the country.⁶

The role to be played by Assad in Syria's future has been an issue of serious friction between Ankara and Moscow since fall 2011, when the Turkish government began to actively support opposition groups in Syria. Since then, Turkey has been a vocal critic of the Assad regime on international platforms, claiming that the Syrian issue would remain unresolvable as long as Assad remained in power. Yet, Turkey's priorities in Syria underwent significant

changes from the summer of 2015 onwards due to its intensifying struggle with the PKK. The territorial advances of the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG forces in Syria in the 2015-2016 period caused particular worry in Ankara.

The possibility of the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in the north of Syria became stronger in August 2016, when the Washington-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which the PYD/YPG played a leading role, liberated the town of Manbij to the west of the Euphrates River. Ankara was alarmed not only due to the strengthened military cooperation between the US and PYD/YPG forces, but also because the latter came very close to achieving its goal of unifying the three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria – Jazira, Kobani and Afrin.

Ankara decided to move closer to the Russian-Iranian axis in Syria, mainly because these two countries have repeatedly emphasized Syria's territorial integrity. Although the Kremlin also developed its relations with the Syrian Kurds and permitted them to open an office in Moscow in February 2016, the initiation of the Turkish-Russian reconciliation process as well as strengthened military relations between Washington and PYD/YPG have led Russia to alter its perceptions on this issue.

The role to be played by Assad in Syria's future has been an issue of serious friction between Ankara and Moscow since fall 2011.

Some analysts have even claimed that Moscow's ultimate goal was to convince Ankara to withdraw its long-standing reservations about Assad in return for keeping a blind eye on Turkey's assaults on PYD/YPG forces within the framework of the Operation Euphrates Shield. Moreover, strained relations between Ankara and



Washington due to the latter's increasing military support to the PYD/YPG forces on the ground have also provided Moscow with the opportunity to politically exploit the growing rift between the two NATO allies.

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Assad has also been uneasy about Kurdish territorial gains in northern Syria, as indicated by the armed clashes that took place between his forces and the PYD/YPG in the town of Hasaka in August 2016.⁸ Considering that Ankara indirectly informed the Assad government about the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield through Moscow and Turkish Prime Minister Yıldırım implied that Turkey could accept Assad's role for a transitionary period in Syria, the Kurdish threat seems to have become much more crucial for Ankara than its reservations about the presence of Assad in Syria's political future.⁹

Turkey's cooperation with Russia and Iran in Syria produced very significant results in a remarkably short period. Above all, this cooperation enabled Ankara to achieve its two major objectives in the region: preventing the unification of the three Kurdish cantons and purging ISIS from northern Syria. If Turkish

forces can eventually take Al Bab from ISIS and Manbij from the PYD/YPG, the strategic objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield will be realized to a very large extent.

Turkish-Russian dialogue has also been crucial for solving the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo and especially for evacuating thousands of civilians from the city. At a time when both the U.S. and UN have become increasingly sidelined in the Aleppo crisis, it was quite remarkable that Ankara managed to convince Moscow to aid the peaceful exit of rebel factions from Aleppo. In fact, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the talks with Ankara had proven to be much more effective than the months-long "fruitless talking shop" with Washington in finding a solution to the Aleppo crisis.¹⁰

Moscow Declaration

The "Moscow Declaration" signed by the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Iran on December 20, 2016 demonstrated the consensus between the three countries in facilitating a comprehensive ceasefire and eventual peace agreement in Syria.¹¹ The document made direct reference to the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which was adopted in December 2015 to support a ceasefire process in Syria. Excluding ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra from the ceasefire efforts, the UN resolution additionally supported a Syrian-led political process to establish "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance within six months and set a schedule and process for the drafting of a new constitution". It also expressed its support for "free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months."¹²

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In a similar vein to Resolution 2254, the Moscow Declaration emphasized Syria's territorial integrity and designated Jabhat al-Nusra – which recently changed its name to Fatah al-Sham – and ISIS as the two terrorist groups to be excluded from the new ceasefire process in Syria. The new round of talks between the Syrian government and opposition, on the other hand, is expected to take place in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, a country which enjoys close relations with both Russia and Turkey.¹³

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The Moscow process is quite important as it is the first time that Turkey, Russia and Iran have come together in an independent platform and joined their efforts for a solution to the Syrian crisis. Although Russia had previously organized negotiations between representatives of the Syrian government and opposition – also labelled as “Moscow talks” – this did not produce any concrete result, mainly because most of the Syrian opposition refused to participate. The presence of Turkey in this new process is in this regard crucial in convincing the leaders of the Syrian opposition to sit at the same table as the representatives of the Assad regime.

It should also be emphasized that the U.S., which has been present as an important actor at the negotiation table in almost all of the previous peace efforts, has largely been excluded from the Moscow process.

More importantly, Turkey, Russia and Iran have for the first time announced their readiness to act as the “guarantors” of a possible peace agreement to be signed as a result of the Astana talks. Considering that these three countries are also currently the most influential actors in Syria through their military forces and troops on the ground, the Moscow process may indeed facilitate the emergence of an effective solution to the Syrian crisis.¹⁴

At the same time, however, the Moscow Declaration has been perceived by some in Turkey as a significant concession to Russia and Iran, mainly because it signified Ankara's abandonment of its previously declared goal of removing Assad from power.¹⁵ It was also criticized by the members of Turkish opposition parties, as it did not include PYD/YPG among the terrorist groups to be repelled in the region.¹⁶ It seems that Ankara had to take a step back on these two issues in order to reach an understanding with Moscow and Tehran regarding a comprehensive ceasefire in Syria.

Other Challenges

An interesting detail about the diplomatic process that led to the signature of the Moscow Declaration has been the behavior of Iran, which played the role of a spoiler in the evacuation of civilians and rebel groups from Aleppo. In fact, the Shiite militias supported by Tehran interrupted the evacuation until Turkey agreed to make a separate deal with Iran about the evacuation of the civilians from the Shiite villages of Foua and Kefraya, which had been besieged by rebel groups backed by Turkey.¹⁷ This can be regarded as a sign that Tehran did not want to remain outside the Aleppo deal, which had been largely brokered through bilateral contacts between Turkey and Russia.

Yet, Iran and other actors in the Syrian conflict were also aware of the conflicting



interests between Ankara and Moscow, which may have had negative implications for Turkish-Russian regional cooperation. The massive civilian casualties caused by the Russian siege of Eastern Aleppo together with the forces of the Assad regime, for instance, have triggered huge reactions against Russia among the Turkish public. In fact, hundreds of people marched to the Russian Consulate in Istanbul on December 13, 2016 to protest Russia's policies in Syria.¹⁸

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A few days later, Russian ambassador Andrey Karlov was killed in Ankara during his visit to an art exhibit by an off-duty Turkish police officer who yelled, "Don't forget Aleppo, don't forget Syria" after shooting the ambassador. Although the incident is being investigated by a joint commission including both Turkish and Russian officials, it can be claimed that the perpetrators wanted to make use of the rising anti-Russian sentiments among the Turkish public to reach their true objectives.

It should be noted, however, that the assassination of Ambassador Karlov did not cause significant damage to the ongoing Turkish-Russian rapprochement process. On the contrary, the two governments acted in close communication and condemned the attack as an "act of terror" which ultimately aimed to harm Turkish-Russian relations.¹⁹ More importantly, the Moscow Declaration, which drew Turkey and Russia's positions in Syria closer, was signed only one day after this incident.

As stated earlier, the Moscow process is regarded as a sign of a significant shift in

Turkey's official position about the presence of Assad in the political future of Syria. The assassination of the Russian ambassador in this regard seems to have strengthened Moscow's hand against Ankara, considering that Lavrov told the reporters right after his meeting with the Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers that their priority in Syria was fighting terrorism, and not the removal of Assad.²⁰ Yet, it is far from certain that the Turkish government has completely given up this goal, as also indicated by President Erdoğan's words in late November that Turkey had intervened in Syria to "end the rule of the cruel Assad".²¹

Erdoğan's statement came shortly after four Turkish soldiers were killed by an airstrike allegedly carried out by the Assad regime.²² When Moscow denied these allegations despite strong evidence revealed by the Turkish authorities and requested an official explanation from Turkey for Erdoğan's words, Ankara toned down its reaction and assured the Kremlin that the goal of Operation Euphrates Shield was fighting terrorist groups – and not a regime change in Syria.²³ Yet, this incident once again demonstrated the limits of Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria as well as Assad's ability to exploit the differences between Ankara and Moscow in order to pursue his own agenda.

It should also be emphasized that the U.S., which has been present as an important actor at the negotiation table in almost all of the previous peace efforts, has largely been excluded from the Moscow process.

Another issue that may complicate relations between Turkey and Russia in the short term is the future of Idlib, which is currently the stronghold not only of the opposition groups that are supported by Turkey, but



also of Jabhat al-Nusra. In fact, most of the rebels who fled Aleppo in December 2016 took shelter in Idlib, which is geographically very close to Russian military bases in Syria. It is claimed that the city could become the next target of the military campaign waged by Russia and Assad forces for this reason.²⁴ Such a development – especially if the crisis in Aleppo is replicated in Idlib – would inevitably become a serious concern not only for the Turkish government, but also the Turkish public.

Should Washington change its position with regard to Syria and seek a new rapprochement with Ankara in the region, the Turkish government may feel obliged to distance itself from Moscow.

Assad is also known to have an interest in controlling the strategic town of Al Bab, which is currently under siege by Turkish forces, in order to secure his recent victory over Aleppo. Although some claim that Russia has given consent for Turkey's takeover of Al Bab, it should be noted that Assad and Iran are both capable of undermining the Turkish-Russian understanding on this issue.²⁵ It is also worth looking at Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu's warning about Hezbollah during his joint press conference with the Russian and Iranian foreign ministers after the Moscow Declaration in this regard.²⁶ The rising influence of Iran in the region through Hezbollah forces and Shiite militias deeply concerns Turkey, and may become a serious obstacle to the continuation of regional dialogue between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran.

Conclusion

"All previous attempts by the United States and its partners to agree on coordinated actions were doomed to failure. None of them wielded real influence over the situation on the ground."²⁷ This is how Russian Defense Minister Shoigu defined the situation in Syria following his meeting with the Turkish and Iranian defense ministers in Moscow, as the foreign ministers of the three countries were signing the declaration that sought to begin a new political process in Syria. This can be regarded as a remarkable acknowledgement of the marginalization of Washington in the Syrian conflict, especially considering how it has been completely excluded by Ankara, Moscow and Tehran from this new peace process.

The Turkish government's alienation from Washington following the failed coup attempt of July 15 has played an important part in this picture. Apart from the reluctance of the US authorities to extradite Fetullah Gülen, who allegedly masterminded the coup attempt, Washington's increasing military support to the PYD/YPG forces has also encouraged Ankara to seek the assistance of Moscow rather than Washington in order to establish an ISIS and PYD/YPG free zone in northern Syria. Some analysts have viewed this process as the division of Syria into two zones of influence: "a Russian-backed littoral state under Assad, claiming to be the sole government of the country, and a 'Free Syria' backed by Turkey."²⁸

Although it may be too early to reach such a conclusion, it is clear that the positions of Ankara and Moscow became even closer in the aftermath of the assassination of the Russian ambassador. It was reported very recently for instance that Russia had agreed to provide greater intelligence support to Turkey in the latter's ongoing campaign to take over Al Bab.²⁹ At the same time, however, it should be recalled that Donald Trump will

be inaugurated as President of the U.S. on January 20, 2017. Although both Turkey and Russia currently have significant problems in their bilateral relations with Washington, the future of the Turkish-Russian dialogue in Syria will be largely shaped by the policies to be followed by the Trump administration.

It should be kept in mind that Turkey seems to have moved closer to Russia more out of necessity than choice, since its options in Syria have been significantly reduced following dramatic changes in the balance of military power in favor of the Assad regime.

Should Washington change its position with regard to Syria and seek a new rapprochement with Ankara in the region, the Turkish government may feel obliged to distance itself from Moscow. Turkish-American cooperation will be particularly important for the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa in the short-term. Yet, as he indicated during his presidential campaign, Trump may also opt to reach an understanding with Putin in order to solve the Syrian problem. In the case of such a grand agreement between the two leaders, the regional priorities of Turkey in Syria will most likely be overlooked by both Washington and Moscow. On the other hand, how Iran will perceive and respond to changing US foreign policy in the region is another factor that may complicate Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that Turkey seems to have moved closer to Russia more out of necessity than choice, since its options in Syria have been significantly reduced following dramatic changes in the balance of military power in favor of the Assad regime. At a time when both Moscow and Tehran have been trying to maximize their gains in Syria before the inauguration

of president-elect Trump, Ankara wanted to strengthen its position by making a deal with the Russian-Iranian axis. However, it had to abandon its goal of removing Assad from power to serve this purpose. This is how the new Moscow process became possible. Yet, the fact that the Turkish government could launch Operation Euphrates Shield and become a major actor in the Moscow process only after its reconciliation with the Kremlin also means that the future trajectory of its military and diplomatic actions in Syria will be very much dependent on Russia's calculations. This will inevitably set new limits for the development of regional dialogue between the two countries in the short-term.



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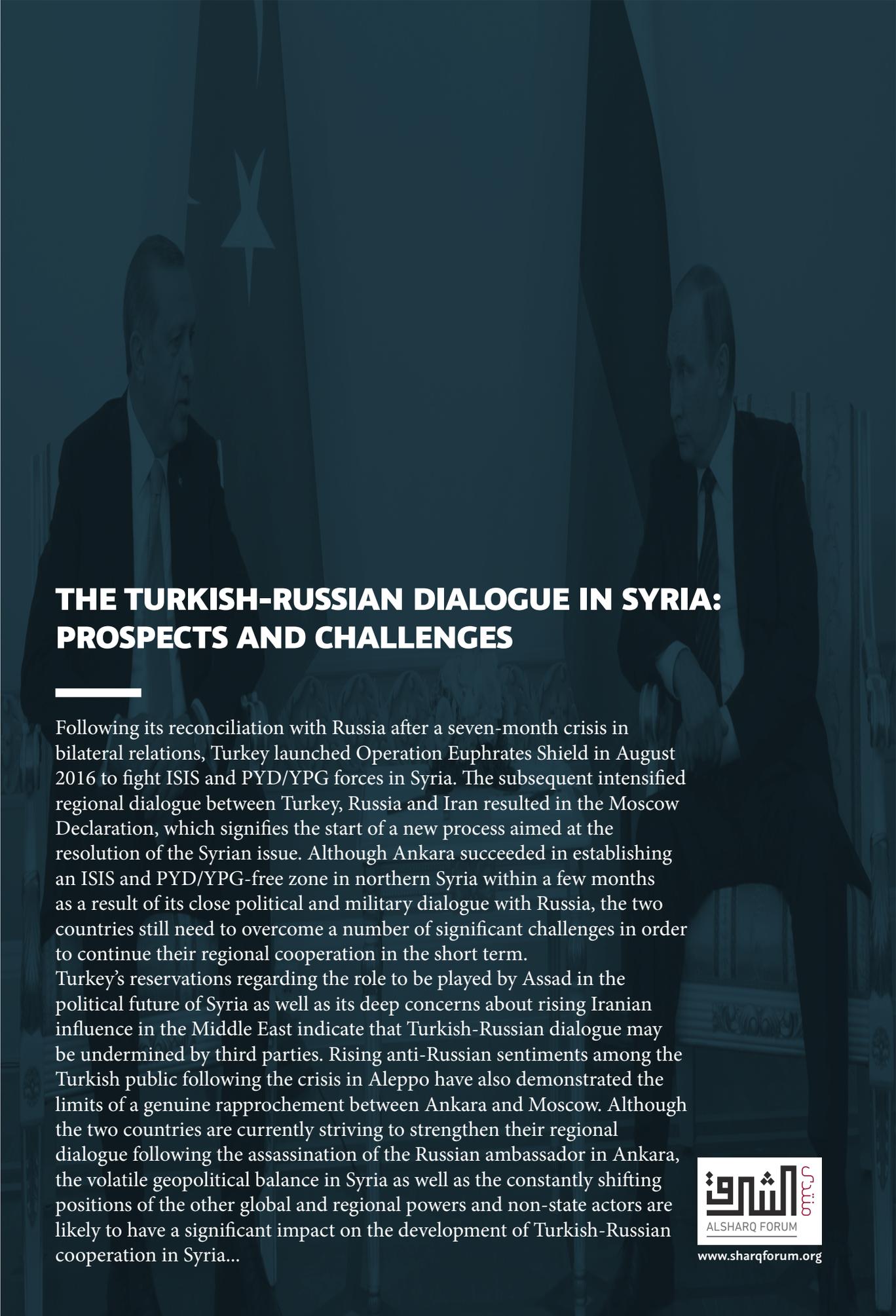
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THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN DIALOGUE IN SYRIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Following its reconciliation with Russia after a seven-month crisis in bilateral relations, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 to fight ISIS and PYD/YPG forces in Syria. The subsequent intensified regional dialogue between Turkey, Russia and Iran resulted in the Moscow Declaration, which signifies the start of a new process aimed at the resolution of the Syrian issue. Although Ankara succeeded in establishing an ISIS and PYD/YPG-free zone in northern Syria within a few months as a result of its close political and military dialogue with Russia, the two countries still need to overcome a number of significant challenges in order to continue their regional cooperation in the short term.

Turkey's reservations regarding the role to be played by Assad in the political future of Syria as well as its deep concerns about rising Iranian influence in the Middle East indicate that Turkish-Russian dialogue may be undermined by third parties. Rising anti-Russian sentiments among the Turkish public following the crisis in Aleppo have also demonstrated the limits of a genuine rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. Although the two countries are currently striving to strengthen their regional dialogue following the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara, the volatile geopolitical balance in Syria as well as the constantly shifting positions of the other global and regional powers and non-state actors are likely to have a significant impact on the development of Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria...



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