



 MDC The Moshe Dayan Center  
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# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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## From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the February 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss analyzes the short and long-term future of reciprocal Israeli-Turkish tourism in the era of normalized relations between the two governments. The second article by Ceng Sagnic discusses the Russo-Turkish rapprochement with a focus on the Syrian war and the shifting Turkish policy concerning this country.

Sarah Jacobs and Jesse Kaminsky contributed to this issue as assistant editors.

## Growing but not Flocking: Israeli Tourism to Turkey

Gallia Lindenstrauss

Following the normalization agreement of June 2016 and the exchange of ambassadors in late 2016, certain aspects of Turkish-Israeli relations are on the road to improvement. Turkish Culture and Tourism Minister, Nabi Avcı visited Israel from February 7-8 for an annual international tourism exhibition (the International Mediterranean Tourism Market – IMTM). It was the first Turkish ministerial visit to Israel in seven years, and Turkey participated in this exhibition after four years of absence.

Avcı used his visit to promote Israeli tourism to Turkey and to facilitate Turkish travel to Israel. Avcı said, “There were 260,000 Israelis who visited Turkey last year and I think it is possible to raise the number to 600,000 as it was in previous years.”<sup>1</sup> In this quote, the minister was referring to the number of Israeli tourists recorded in Turkey in 2008.<sup>2</sup> However, following the Israeli operation in Gaza in late 2008 and the aftermath of the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident, the number of Israeli tourists declined substantially. During these years of crisis (2010-2016), most of the Israelis traveling on vacation to Turkey were Arab citizens of Israel, which was not the case prior to 2008. In 2012, the number of tourists dropped to their lowest level in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, it should be noted that Turkey did not reinstate visa requirements for Israelis traveling to Turkey during these years of crisis. As relations between the states normalized, from 2015 to 2016, there was indeed a notable increase of at least 30 percent more Israeli tourists visiting Turkey.<sup>4</sup> That being said, it seems unlikely that the 2008 numbers will replicate themselves in the near future.

There are several reasons why a full return to the pre-2008 figures is unlikely in the short term. First, the rising number of terror attacks in Turkey has hurt tourism. Since March 2016, the Israeli National Security Council Counter-Terrorism Bureau issued the second highest travel alert (“High concrete threat”) for Israelis considering traveling to Turkey.<sup>5</sup> The elevated travel alert was the result of the İstiklal Avenue terror attack that month, in which the largest number of casualties were tourists from Israel. While it was never definitively proven that the suicide bomber explicitly targeted the Israeli group, there was nevertheless concern that this was indeed the case. Another Israeli tourist was killed in the Reina night club attack during the 2017 New Year celebration. In a poll conducted ahead of the IMTM fair, 52 percent of Israelis polled said they were afraid to travel to cities in which terror attacks occurred during the past year, including Berlin, Paris, and Istanbul.<sup>6</sup> Still, despite the Istanbul Atatürk Airport terror attack of June 2016, Turkish Airlines remained the most popular foreign carrier from Ben Gurion Airport in terms of its number of passengers in 2016, second only to Israeli carrier El Al.<sup>7</sup> There are currently 98 scheduled flights each week between Tel Aviv and Istanbul.<sup>8</sup> Most Israelis, however, only use Istanbul as a point for transit for other destinations.

The second reason that a return to the pre-2008 numbers remains unlikely is that the *Mavi Marmara* incident sowed residual feelings of distrust and hostility between the states. In the poll ahead of the IMTM fair, no respondent mentioned Turkey as their preferred tourist destination. In another poll following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apology in 2013 to then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, half the respondents said they do not plan to vacation in Turkey in the near future because of the tense atmosphere between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, the expansion of low cost air travel following aviation agreements between Israel and the European Union in 2013, and with additional countries, has expanded the previously limited range of affordable travel opportunities for Israelis. Still, many Israeli tourists continue to fly to nearby destinations: around 400,000 vacationed in Greece in 2015<sup>10</sup> and more than 150,000 vacationed in the Republic of Cyprus in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

The Turkish minister's visit also raised awareness of the growing number of Turkish tourists coming to Israel. He stated that 30,000 Turkish tourists came to Israel last year.<sup>12</sup> He urged more Turks to visit the *al-Aqsa* mosque in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> While the numbers are still low, in recent years there has been a general increase in the number of Muslim tourists coming to Israel for religious purposes.<sup>14</sup> While Israelis do not need a visa to travel to Turkey, Turkish citizens need a visa to travel to Israel. During the political consultations between the Turkish and Israeli foreign ministry delegations in Ankara in January 2017, the issue of mutual visa waivers was raised.<sup>15</sup> However, it is likely that due to security concerns, Israel will find it difficult to completely lift the visa requirements for Turkish citizens. Moreover, even if Israel does make the process easier, there is still likely to be problems at the Ben Gurion Airport for Turks arriving and departing, as such incidents have already occurred in recent years.<sup>16</sup>

During his visit, Avcı inaugurated the Turkish cultural center in Jaffa in the renovated former Ottoman governor's building. Funded by the Turkish government, the renovation was completed in 2008, but the deterioration in relations delayed its opening.<sup>17</sup> The Turkish government also completed the renovation of the Grand Synagogue of Edirne in 2015. These two projects are a reminder that in the distant future, reciprocal Israeli-Turkish tourism can be expanded well beyond the usual attractions. In the short term however, security concerns and the unease from the crisis years remain obstacles.

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*Less America, Less Iran:*  
**The Russo-Turkish Rapprochement in Syria**

**Ceng Sagnic**

The recent Russo-Turkish rapprochement has allowed both governments to diminish the roles of each of their respective rivals in the Syrian conflict. The Russian-led bloc's heavy pressure has pushed some of the rebel groups to seek survival instead of victory. Meanwhile, radical Islamist organizations have filled the power vacuum left by retreating Syrian or rebel forces, while nationalist Kurds have formed an Iraq-style semi-autonomous administration in parts of northern Syria. In this fluid environment, Turkey has given-up its opposition to the Russian-led bloc in Syria in exchange for a policy focused on securing Turkey's foothold in the overall geopolitical equation. Turkey's policy change and rapprochement with Russia have diminished Iran's role in Syria and secured Turkey's last point of access to the Sunni-Arab Middle East, through its control over territory it captured during Operation Euphrates Shield, which extends from Jarablus to the north of al-Bab. For Russia, the rapprochement with Turkey limits US involvement in political negotiations over Syria's future. While the Russo-Turkish facilitated political process in Astana lacks the capacity to singlehandedly determine Syria's future, Russo-Turkish rapprochement could reduce US and Iranian influence in Syria.

**The Border Crisis: Turkey's Changing Syria Policy and Rapprochement with Russia**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Turkey's anti-Assad Syria policy has shifted from remote support for rebel groups to on-the-ground military intervention, which commenced in August 2016 with the ongoing Operation Euphrates Shield led by the Turkish military. Turkey's changing policy in Syria included a rather surprising rapprochement with Russia, which raises concerns for Iran and other Russian allies in Syria.

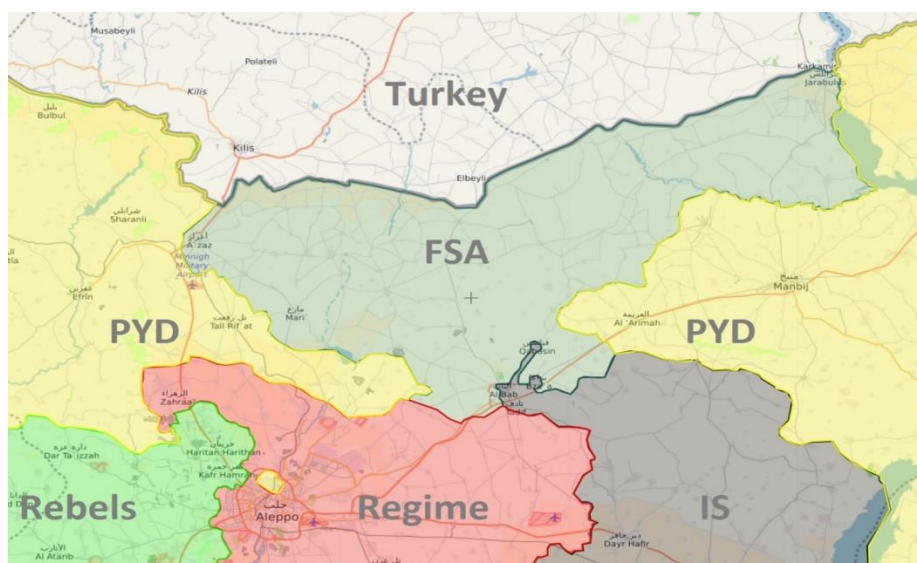
Official Turkish statements do not fully reflect Turkey's motives for its military intervention in Syria. According to Turkish officials, the primary objective of Turkey's intervention in northern Syria is to protect rebel groups from the Russian-backed al-Assad regime and radical Islamist organizations – players which also threaten Turkey's national security. The statements also identify the secondary objective of preventing US-backed Kurdish groups from connecting the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat –PYD)-administrated self-declared cantons. These stated objectives of the ongoing operation in Syria evoke widespread support from Turkish nationalists for the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP).<sup>18</sup> However, not all of Turkey's reasons for directly intervening in Syria are fully articulated in these official statements.

First, prior to August 2016, Turkey was almost on the verge of losing its geographical connection to the Sunni-Arab Middle East. Russia's 2015 military intervention boosted al-Assad's territorial gains against the rebels while the US-backed Kurds continued to seize border regions from the Islamic State (IS). With Shi'i Iran to the east and Kurdish northern Iraq and northern Syria to the south, before August 2016, Turkey's only access to the rest of the Middle East was the besieged and rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib. This limited access to the Sunni-Arab Middle East was a natural result of the advances around Aleppo by the Syrian regime and its Shi'i allies, with support from the Russian military. In other words, while supporting the Sunni-Arab forces attempting to topple the Syrian regime, Turkey was caught off guard by Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, and faced the imminent risk of losing territorial access to its natural allies. This border crisis played a significant role in Turkey's policy shift.

Turkish policy makers' understanding of Turkey's capacity to influence the Syrian conflict was impacted by the following factors: Iran's success with proxy paramilitary groups; the US government's support for Syrian Kurdish groups aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - PKK); the inability of Syrian rebels to form a united front, despite Turkey's unconditional support; and Russia's first military intervention in a Middle Eastern country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkish policy makers recognized Turkey's compromised position, and the fact that Russia had the capacity to block Turkey's military maneuvers in Syria with its strong and technologically superior military presence. In order to remain an actor in Syria, the AKP-ruled Turkey's options were narrowed, resulting in its pursuit of a tactical and limited-scale alliance with Russia. That being said, Russia's open permission for Turkey's surgical intervention within Syrian territories is not the only outcome of the Russo-Turkish rapprochement.

The rapprochement has also significantly limited Iranian influence in areas with no Turkish operational activity. This is critical to Turkey, considering that according to the most recent reports by Russian sources, a Russo-Turkish agreement preset the boundaries of Turkish operational expansion in northern Syria.<sup>19</sup> In a stunning demonstration of the limitation of Iranian influence, the pro-Russian head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that his Sunni militiamen from Chechnya have been deployed to the Syrian regime-controlled Aleppo.<sup>20</sup> Even though there is no way to confirm that the dispatch of Sunni Chechen forces to Aleppo is part of an agreement between Turkey and Russia, many sources on the ground in Syria and Turkey emphasize that the decision was taken by Russia to limit Iran's operational influence in the Sunni-populated second largest city of Syria.<sup>21</sup> In fact, some Turkish sources, quoting anonymous Turkish diplomats, reported Iran's opposition to Operation Euphrates Shield - an operation conducted in cooperation with Russia, including limited Russian aerial support for the Turkish military.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the addition of Turkey, the outspoken sponsor of the Syrian revolution,

as a partner in the trilateral Syria negotiations diminishes Iran's influence, while leaving Russia's superior position unchanged.



*Map of territorial control in northern Aleppo, Syria Source: Liveuamap*

### **Less America: Russia's Turkey Factor in Syria**

The objectives of Russia's military intervention may already have been achieved along the coastline, with the consolidation of regime control and the dramatic increase of Russian military power, as well as through the Assad regime's capture of the strategic city of Aleppo. Prior to the Russian intervention in 2015, the Syrian regime was faced with the imminent risk of losing territorial continuity. This continuity was threatened by IS expansion to al-Qaryatayn in Homs, al-Qaeda presence in Zabadani of Rif Dimashq, and rebel groups from Idlib within range of the coastal city of Latakia. Today, courtesy of Russia's presence, even the Islamic State (IS) cannot threaten the territorial continuity of the Syrian regime, despite recent IS advances beyond Palmyra in central Syria. Meanwhile, according to many observers, the expansion of Russian military bases in western Syria has secured Russia's access to the NATO-dominated eastern Mediterranean Sea, and limited NATO's operational capacity in that area.<sup>23</sup>

However, the assumption that Russia shares Bashar al-Assad's intentions, including keeping al-Assad in power and restoring government control to the entire country, is undercut by the improvement of Russia's relations with Turkey and the US-backed Syrian Kurds. After all, Russia has introduced Turkey to the trilateral negotiations, despite Turkey's open support for rebel groups, and has renewed talks with Syria's Kurds over Kurdish nationalist aspirations.<sup>24</sup> These developments reflect the possibility that Russia is not planning a resolution to the Syrian crisis that would be amenable to Bashar al-Assad and regime loyalists. If this is the case, then Russia may be including Turkey in order to expedite the political process that could eventually

allow for the scaling back of Russian military engagement in Syria, after Idlib is recaptured by the regime.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Turkey and its rebel proxies in direct talks with the Syrian regime and Iran is likely to decrease US influence over the negotiation process. Parallel to Turkey's utilization of Russia to diminish Iran's role in Syria, Russia's assignment of Turkey to lead the rebel side of the trilateral Astana talks is a means of reducing America's role in the overall process. Even though negotiations among Syrian belligerents including the Kurds - are not likely to gain any significant momentum outside the framework of the UN-sponsored Geneva talks, the Russo-Turkish rapprochement has detached Turkey's military mission in Syria from the overall mission of the US-led international coalition, and set up Astana as an alternative platform for negotiations. Given Turkey's nascent anti-Western sentiments, particularly due to US support for Syrian Kurds, the option that is "*less America*" is seen as a win-win situation for Turkey and Russia.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Win-Win: The Syria Conundrum with the Russo-Turkish Rapprochement**

The Russo-Turkish rapprochement in the Syrian crisis allows both sides to diminish the role of Iran and the US in the overall political and military processes. For Turkey, reaching an understanding with Russia required some tolerable compromises in Aleppo and the Mediterranean coast, but allowed Turkey to recover from its border crisis and offset the influence of its historical opponent, Iran. As of the writing of this article, Turkish forces have reportedly reached al-Bab from the north, and the Syrian military has refrained from entering territories to the south of al-Bab designated for future Turkish-backed FSA control. This is a result of the rapprochement with Russia. In the meantime, Turkey's influence over a significant portion of the Syrian opposition allowed Russia to singlehandedly lead the Astana talks, a US-free platform.

The *less Iran, less America* option, produced by the Russo-Turkish rapprochement, is a win-win situation for both sides. While the trilateral political negotiations between Russia, Iran, and Turkey are still not capable of resolving the Syrian crisis or imposing a lasting ceasefire, the Russo-Turkish rapprochement as the basis of these negotiations has become a key factor for both Russia and Turkey in their respective Syria policies. A political process that would make the costly and large-scale Russian military operations in Syria unnecessary cannot proceed without Turkish compromises on behalf of the rebel groups in Idlib and Aleppo. Simultaneously, a viable solution for the Turkish border crisis - potentially one of the greatest geopolitical challenges that Turkey has encountered - requires Russia's green light.

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## Notes

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