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## **Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Cooperation and Competition in Syria**

Brandon Friedman

The meeting between Iran, Turkey and Russia in Astana, Kazakhstan on January 23-24, in advance of the next round of U.N. sponsored Geneva III meetings,<sup>1</sup> has been characterized as a new anti-West axis meant to marginalize the U.S. in Syria and the region.<sup>2</sup> Yet Moscow's reset with Ankara is not primarily directed at the West; rather, Russia is trying to reestablish itself as Syria's ultimate arbiter. Since September 2015, Iran and Russia's military support — boots on the ground and air power, respectively — have ensured the al-Asad regime's survival in Syria.<sup>3</sup> However, since the failed U.S.-Russia attempt to impose a ceasefire agreement in Aleppo in August and September,<sup>4</sup> gaps have emerged between Iran and Russia on a vision for the way forward.<sup>5</sup> This led Russia to support Turkey's August military incursion into northern Syria in order to provide Moscow with a stronger hand in shaping a political settlement to the war. To that end, it reconciled with Turkey to reduce Iran's influence and constrain the Asad regime,

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<sup>1</sup> The Geneva meetings were scheduled for February 8. Russia recently reported that they have been postponed until the end of the month. See: "[Geneva talks postponed until the end of February — Russia's top diplomat](#)," TASS, January 27, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "[The New Axis: Russia, Turkey and Iran Take Over Syria](#)," *The Moscow Times*, December 30, 2016; Patrick Wintour, "[Common ground on Syria unites Russia and Turkey against the west](#)," *The Guardian*, December 21, 2016; Ben Hubbard and David E. Sanger, "[Russia, Iran and Turkey Meet for Syria Talks, Excluding U.S.](#)," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2016. Also, see: Mustafa Aykol, "[Is Russia pulling Turkey away from the West](#)," *al-Monitor*, October 8, 2016; Grigol Mgaloblishvili and Andrew R. Novo, "[Watch Out NATO: Turkey and Russia Might Team Up](#)," NationalInterest.org, August 9, 2016; Keith Johnson and John Hudson, "[NATO Plays It Cool as Russia and Turkey Grow Closer](#)," ForeignPolicy.com, August 10, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Eyal Zisser, "[The Russian and Iranian Military Intervention in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9:16, September 25, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Wroughton, John Irish, and Denis Dyomkin, "[U.S., Russia fail to agree on how to revive the Syria ceasefire](#)," *Reuters*, September 22, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Chulov, "[Russia's influence has risen but Iran is the real winner in Aleppo](#)," *The Observer*, December 17, 2016; Ali Hashem, "[Why Iran never counted on US-Russia agreement](#)," *al-Monitor*, September 20, 2016.

limiting Asad's ability to maneuver between Russia and Iran.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Turkey and Iran's competing regional interests allow Russia to serve as the broker between them because Russia enjoys better relations with both Turkey and Iran than they enjoy with one another. Russia is locking in its strategic military gains with the Asad regime, while limiting both Iran and Turkey's ability to shape outcomes in Syria without Russia's approval. Ultimately, Russia still intends to use its political influence in Syria as an international, rather than regional, bargaining chip. It wants to reduce constraints the West has imposed on it in the Crimea, Ukraine, and elsewhere, while bolstering its image as a global power.

Russia's recalibration in Syria began in August and September 2016. The Asad regime, together with Iran, resisted Russian-U.S. efforts to impose a ceasefire agreement, which the Asad regime and its allies viewed as preventing it from crushing the rebels in Aleppo.<sup>7</sup> Asad's September 2016 statement that he was determined to retake "every inch" of Syria was a repetition of the same vow he made in February 2016 that met with a public Russian rebuke.<sup>8</sup> According to political analyst Vladimir Frolov, Russia found itself unable "to ensure the fulfillment by its client of the obligations undertaken by Moscow to the United States and the UN Security Council," which threatened to undermine "its claims to the role of an irreplaceable great power."<sup>9</sup> In other words, Asad's defiant behavior as an unruly client threatened Russia's plan to lock in its gains in Syria, "as it slow-rolled negotiations to make enough time for eliminating the opposition."<sup>10</sup>

Asad and his allies have taken back only two percent of the territory the regime has lost since the rebellion began in 2011. And while these gains constitute the bulk of "useful Syria," there are good reasons for the regime to want to regain control of all of its territory. There are valuable hydrocarbon, agricultural, and

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<sup>6</sup> See: Kamal Alam, "The View from Damascus," in [Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict](#), Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute, August 2016, pp. 11-16; and, Sarah Lain and Igor Sutyagin, "The View from Moscow," in [Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict](#), Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute, August 2016, pp. 17-24.

<sup>7</sup> See: "Syria's Assad delivers defiant Eid message from Daraya," *Al Jazeera* [English], September 12, 2016; Erika Solomon, "[Assad defiant as US-Russia-brokered ceasefire starts in Syria](#)," *Financial Times*, September 13, 2016; Mehdi Jedinia, "[As Syrian Cease-fire Takes Hold, Iran's Role Remains Murky](#)," *VOA News*, September 13, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "[Russia warns Assad on vow to retake all of Syria](#)," *AFP*, February 19, 2016; "[Full transcript of AP interview with Syrian President Assad](#)," September 22, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "Easier to go in than to come out: Results of Russia's military presence in Syria," *Vedomosti - BBC International Monitoring*, September 29, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kofman, "[The Misadventures of Russia and the United States in Syria: Complete Strategy Implosion Edition](#)," *Warontherocks.com*, October 11, 2016.

water resources in the areas under Islamic State (IS) control.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the regime is incapable of doing so on its own. The Syrian Arab Army has two or three elite units, and the rest of its forces operate as competing, and often independent bodies.<sup>12</sup> The regime has relied heavily on the Russian air force, as well as Russian Special Forces and private military contractors. On the ground, Iranian Special Forces, Lebanese Hizballah, as well as Afghani Shi'a (Fatimid Brigade) and Pakistani Shi'a (Zaynab Brigade) militiamen, under Iranian direction,<sup>13</sup> have supplemented the regime's dwindling manpower.<sup>14</sup> Moscow tried to reduce Iranian authority and reassert control over Asad by bringing some of the militia forces under a single Syrian Army command, but this effort failed.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore Moscow, seeking more control over its partners in Syria, turned to Turkey, with which relations had reached a nadir following Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015.<sup>16</sup> The initial Turkey-Russia reset took place in early August 2016, when Turkey's President Erdoğan traveled to Russia to meet with President Putin.<sup>17</sup> This meeting was reminiscent of Qassem Suleimani's visit to Moscow in July 2015,<sup>18</sup> which led to Moscow and Tehran's military escalation two months later.<sup>19</sup> Two weeks after Erdoğan's meeting with Putin, on August 24, Turkey sent its military into Syria as "Operation Euphrates Shield," which Ankara declared an anti-IS operation, but in reality was meant to prevent the Syrian Kurds from establishing contiguous territorial autonomy

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<sup>11</sup> Fabrice Balanche, "[Assad needs 'Useless Syria' Too](#)," Policywatch 2742, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), January 4, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Roy Gutman, "[The Syrian cease-fire, the rebels and the government of President Bashar al-Assad](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 2016; Tobias Schneider, "[The Decay of the Syrian Regime is Much Worse Than You Think](#)," Warontherocks.com, August 31, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Sadollah Zarei, "Turkey of today, Turkey of tomorrow," *Keyhan*—BBC International Monitoring, January 3, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Ansari and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, "The View from Tehran," in [Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict](#), Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute, August 2016, pp. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "Easier to go in than to come out: Results of Russia's military presence in Syria," *Vedomosti* - BBC International Monitoring, September 29, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Brandon Friedman and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "[The Sultan versus the Tsar and the Syrian War](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9: 21, December 10, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> "[Turkey's Erdogan: I want to reset Russia ties from clean slate-TASS](#)," *Reuters*, August 9, 2016; Dimitar Bechev, "[What's behind the Turkey-Russia reset?](#)" *Al Jazeera* [English], August 9, 2016; Metin Gurcan, "[What's next following the Erdogan-Putin summit?](#)" *al-Monitor*, August 15, 2016; Fehim Tastekin, "[What will be Turkey's toll for a second chance with Russia?](#)" *al-Monitor*, August 11, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Qassem Suleimani is the commander of Iran's Quds Force, and has been responsible for Iranian operations in Syria since 2011. See: Dexter Filkins, "[Shadow Commander](#)," *New Yorker*, September 30, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> "[Iran Quds chief visited Russia despite U.N. travel ban: Iran official](#)," *Reuters*, August 7, 2016; Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "[How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow](#)," *Reuters*, October 6, 2016.

along Turkey's southern border.<sup>20</sup> The Turkish offensive was not coordinated with the U.S., which was supposed to be leading the coalition against the IS in Syria.<sup>21</sup> On September 21, Erdoğan, in a sharp departure from his consistent public rhetoric calling for Asad's ouster, did not mention Asad once during a 30-minute address to the U.N. General Assembly. On October 5, two days after the final breakdown in diplomatic efforts between Russia and the U.S., Putin and Erdoğan discussed Syria on the phone.<sup>22</sup>

Turkish journalist Nuray Mert argued that the Turkish-Russian "rapprochement" was not a case of the two parties moving closer to one another, but rather Turkey moving closer to Russia on Syria and other issues.<sup>23</sup> Yet Russia and Turkey's "marriage of convenience,"<sup>24</sup> appears to serve both of their interests in Syria. Turkey obtains a free hand in northern Syria to stymie the territorial ambitions of the U.S.-supported Syrian Kurds, while Russia gets a compliant partner that will constrain Iran's influence and help wind down the conflict by co-opting portions of the "revolutionary" (as opposed to jihadist) anti-Asad Sunni opposition.<sup>25</sup> Turkish military forces on the ground in northern Syria, supported by Russia air power, also provide Moscow with the means to limit the ambitions of both the Kurds and Iran in Syria, without expending a great deal of Russian blood or treasure. Further, intelligence sharing between the two countries has allowed them to begin conducting joint air strikes against Islamic State targets in Syria.<sup>26</sup> In the wake of the regime's brutal victory against the opposition in Aleppo, Turkey was even able to coordinate with Moscow on the deployment of a battalion of Russian Chechen (Sunni) military contractors to protect humanitarian staff and Russian sappers in place of regime forces or Iranian-financed Shi'i militias.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Metin Gurcan, "[What's Turkey really up to in Syria?](#)," *al-Monitor*, August 25, 2016; Metin Gurcan, "[What comes next for Turkey following the Jarablus victory?](#)," *al-Monitor*, August 29, 2016; Aaron Stein, "[This is how Turkey's Incursion into Syria Could Get Bugged Down](#)," Warontherocks.com, September 7, 2016; Aaron Stein, "[Will Turkey Present Trump with a Fait Accompli in Syria?](#)," Warontherocks.com, November 17, 2016;

<sup>21</sup> Adam Entous, Gordon Lubold, and Dion Nissenbaum, "[Turkish Offensive on Islamic State in Syria Caught U.S. Off Guard](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2016; Metin Gurcan, "[Russia pleased with deepening US-Turkey rift over Syria](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 5, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Igor Kryuchkov and Alexander Atasuntsev, "Erdogan applies pressure in south. Turkey's Anti-Kurdish campaign stabilizes Syria and Iraq," *Gazeta.ru-BBC International Monitoring*, October 6, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Nuray Mert, "The Turkish-Russian Empires Ideal," *Cumhuriyet-BBC International Monitoring*, December 23, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Henri J. Barkey, "[Putin and Erdogan's Marriage of Convenience](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 11, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Noah Bonsey, "[What's at Stake in the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana?](#)," *International Crisis Group*, January 24, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "[Russians and Turks Conduct Joint Strikes on ISIS in Syria](#)," *The New York Times*, January 18, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Ibra Joudeh, "[Russian Military Police Arrive in Aleppo to Help Maintain Security- Russian MoD](#)," *al-Masdar*, December 23, 2016..

In December, Russia demonstrated its new leverage as the arbitrator between Shi'i Iran and Sunni Turkey in Syria. At Turkey's request, Russia facilitated the humanitarian evacuation of more than 37,000 Sunni civilians from Aleppo to Idlib Province. As a fig leaf to Iran, which only learned of the evacuation after it was underway, Russia and Turkey coordinated the evacuation of pro-regime residents of the towns of Fua and Kefraya in Idlib Province to the pro-regime towns of Zabadani and Madaya near Damascus, along the Lebanese border, after living under Sunni rebel siege for more than 18 months.<sup>28</sup> The trilateral coordination between Iran, Russia, and Turkey was formalized in the eight-point Moscow Declaration that Iran, Russia, and Turkey agreed to as a roadmap to end the Syrian War;<sup>29</sup> on December 31 the U.N. gave its stamp of approval to the declaration.

Some view the Moscow Declaration, as a sign of the growing strength of Russian-Iranian relations.<sup>30</sup> Russian officials have promoted Turkish-Russian military cooperation as a means of peeling Turkey away from the West to form a more effective Iran-Russia-Turkey "axis."<sup>31</sup> But this view excessively downplays the existing mistrust and rivalry between the three of them.

While each of the three shares a commitment to preserving the territorial integrity of Syria (the first point of the Moscow Declaration), they have diverging interests. Turkey's priority is preventing a Kurdish PYD-PKK<sup>32</sup> bloc along its

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<sup>28</sup> "Turkey's Syria policy collapses in Moscow," *Cumhuriyet*-BBC International Monitoring, December 21, 2016; Martin Chulov, "[Aleppo evacuations resume after buses attacked and burned](#)," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> "Turkey's Syria policy collapses in Moscow," *Cumhuriyet*-BBC International Monitoring, December 21, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Rubin, "Russia and Iran are closer than ever before—and their military alliance keeps expanding," *Business Insider*, December 23, 2016. Prior to the Moscow Declaration, see: Vali Nasr, "A Russian-Iranian Axis," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2016; Ellie Geranmayeh and Kadri Liik, "[The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East](#)," European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), September 13, 2016. For more skeptical views, see: Ofra Bengio, "[Strange Bedfellows: Russia-Turkish-Iranian Axis](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, January 25, 2017; Alireza Nader, "[Iran at Putin's Mercy](#)," *NationalInterest.org*, January 12, 2017; and, Ari Heistein and Vera Michlin-Shafir, "[The Russia-Iran Alliance Is Weaker Than You Think](#)," *NationalInterest.org*, April 5, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Metin Gurcan, "Russia pleased with deepening US-Turkey rift over Syria," *al-Monitor*, January 5, 2017; "[Russia-Iran-Turkey alliance most effective in solving Syrian crisis - Lavrov](#)," *RT.com*, December 20, 2016; "[How Russia-Iran-Turkey alliance 'already bearing fruit' in Syria](#)," *Sputnik News*, December 23, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> The PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*/Democratic Union Party) is the dominant Kurdish nationalist party in Syria. Turkey views the PYD as an extension of the PKK organization. The U.S. disputes this claim. The PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*/Kurdistan Workers' Party) is a Kurdish nationalist organization in Turkey, which has been listed as a terrorist organization by NATO, the EU, and the U.S..

border in Syria and Iran.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey has supported elements of the Syrian opposition for the past five years and will not simply abandon them, without first trying to bring them into the political process. Turkey's ties to the Syrian opposition, which Russia views as an asset in its efforts to broker a political solution, are viewed with deep skepticism if not outright hostility by Iran. An editorial in the hardline Iranian newspaper, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, noted that "reports and news received from the borders of Turkey and Syria demonstrate that Ankara is continuing with its main role of strengthening the terrorists' military stamina."<sup>34</sup>In fact, Moscow's turn to Turkey should be viewed as an indication that there are important differences between Moscow and Tehran regarding the way forward in Syria.<sup>35</sup>

Iran and the Assad regime are not keen on transforming the Aleppo ceasefire into a permanent national ceasefire, as outlined in the Moscow Declaration. They would like to stay on the offensive, using a temporary ceasefire to prepare for continuing the war against the opposition in northwestern Idlib Province. Taking Idlib would allow Iran to secure its land bridge, or "Sunni-free corridor," from Tehran to the Syrian coast and it would create a territorial buffer zone to protect Latakia Province, which is the 'Alawi heartland and the Assad's regime's stronghold.<sup>36</sup> Iran also wants to create a stronger Shi'i demographic in the Syrian territory between Damascus and the Lebanese border, repopulating this strip of formerly Sunni territory with Shi'is.<sup>37</sup> While Russia may not object to these goals, it is not willing to assume the military or financial burden that may be required to bring them to fruition. More broadly, Iran and Russia have different objectives when it comes to the future of the Syrian regime.

Iran would like to ensure that the Syrian regime becomes its fully subordinate client by engineering the Lebanonization of Syria, which would mean a government with weak institutions that is beholden to Iran.<sup>38</sup> One of the reasons that Putin would like to see a plan for political transition in Syria is that new

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<sup>33</sup> Aldulkadir Selvi, "Axis Shift or Paradigm Shift?," *Hurriyet -BBC International Monitoring*, October 25, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> "Observations regarding Syria's comprehensive ceasefire," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, December 31, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Samir Altaqi and Esam Aziz, "[Syria and the Complex Geostrategic Game of Russia-Turkey-Iran](#)," Middle East Briefing, January 26, 2017; Sinem Cengiz, "[Russia, Iran face alliance dilemma](#)," *Arab News*, January 28, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Chulov, "[Amid Syrian chaos, Iran's game plan emerges: a path to the Mediterranean](#)," *The Observer*, October 8, 2016; Noah Bonsey, "[What's at Stake in the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana?](#)," International Crisis Group, January 24, 2017; Hanin Ghaddar, "[The Latest Ceasefire Will Not Change Hezbollah's Role in Syria](#)," *Policywatch* 2744, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), January 6, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Chulov, "[Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control](#)," *The Guardian*, January 14, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, "[The Latest Ceasefire Will Not Change Hezbollah's Role in Syria](#)," *Policywatch* 2744, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), January 6, 2017.

leadership in Syria would not feel indebted to Iran to the same degree that Asad is today. Andrey Kortunov, director general of the Russian International Affairs Council, even suggested that Russia had already identified several candidates to succeed Asad.<sup>39</sup> Further, transferring power away from the Asad family and strengthening Syria's institutions of governance would prevent a Quds Force (the special unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. responsible for foreign operations) takeover of the Syrian state and provide Russia with a long-term means to preserve its influence. Russia is seeking a political agreement that would stabilize the central government and wind down the fighting between the regime and the opposition in territory it considers "useful Syria." According to unnamed Russian sources, "the idea would then be to get Gulf states involved, then the United States, and at a later stage the European Union which would be asked, maybe with the Gulf states, to pick up the bill for rebuilding."<sup>40</sup> A political transition would allow Russia to preserve an institutional framework in Syria that enables Russia to maintain its political influence and expand its military facilities there, which constitute its strategic hub in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>41</sup>

Russia's goals in Syria transcend Syria. Putin does not simply want to prop up Asad indefinitely, while slaughtering the opposition.<sup>42</sup> The so-called "Grozny Rules"<sup>43</sup> and the comparison to Chechnya<sup>44</sup> is a fair one, but limited because Syria is not sovereign Russian territory. Russia ultimately views Syria as a means to a broader geopolitical end. A new U.S. administration offers Putin an opportunity to use its influence in Syria to make headway on other issues that may be more important to him. To be sure, Russia is not looking for a way out of Syria. Indeed, the Syrian War has allowed Russia to regain much of the political influence in the region that it lost to the U.S. in the late 1970s.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Russia brought Turkey into the diplomatic process to limit both Iran and Asad's freedom of action, as well as ensure that Moscow has the final word in any political settlement to the conflict.

*Brandon Friedman is a Researcher at the [Moshe Dayan Center \(MDC\) for Middle East and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.](#)*

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Osbourn and Orhan Coskun, "[Russia, Turkey, and Iran eye dicing Syria into zones of influence](#)," *Reuters*, December 28, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "[Russia to upgrade its air, naval bases in Syria: Interfax](#)," *Reuters*, January 15, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Aron Lund, "[Staring into Syria's Diplomatic Fog](#)," The Century Foundation, January 6, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Galeotti, "[Putin is Playing by Grozny Rules in Aleppo](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, September 29, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Oliver Bullough, "[Putin in Syria: Chechnya All Over Again](#)," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Ehud Yaari, "[Russia Pursues a New Baghdad Pact](#)," *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2015.

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