



Volume 9, Number 21

December 10, 2015

## **The Sultan versus the Tsar and the Syrian War**

Brandon Friedman and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

On November 24, 2015, a Turkish F-16 warplane downed a Russian Su-24 Sukhoi/Fencer jet that had entered Turkish airspace, leading to a very public confrontation between Russia and Turkey. The incident is the most recent example of the multidimensional nature of the Syrian war, and carries the potential for escalation that threatens to overshadow and exacerbate the local dimension of the conflict. This incident is playing out as a modern revival of the centuries-old conflict between the Russian tsar versus the Turkish sultan, but, looking beyond the strong personalities, its immediate importance lies in how the simmering confrontation will affect the Syrian war.

In its early stages, the conflict in Syria was often characterized as a “proxy war.” This referred to external actors such as Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, who were fueling the conflict by pursuing their interests in Syria through local actors, state and non-state. However, the proxy characterization quickly became outdated, if it ever really applied, because in some cases the patrons were fighting and dying alongside their proxies on the ground. Hizballah and Iranian forces were fighting in Syria in 2013, if not earlier. More recently, the conflict has been referred to as a “civil war,” which is also misleading, because while this conflict may ultimately come to define what it means to be a Syrian, the war itself has become much more than a civil war. It encompasses international and regional actors, both state and non-state—such as Hizballah, the Islamic State (IS), the various Kurdish factions, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Russia—and their competing interests. The Syrian war, therefore, is multilayered and includes three levels of conflict — local, regional, and international.

Russia and Turkey are historical rivals. Their imperial predecessors fought twelve wars over the domination of the Black Sea, Caucasia, and the Balkans. The collapse of these imperial powers at the end of World War I did not improve

their relations. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviets claimed the Kars and Ardahan provinces and a military base in the Turkish straits. Due to growing security concerns within context of the Cold War, Turkey became a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. While membership provided Turkey a certain degree of protection from Soviet Union, it did not provide Turkish decision makers with peace of mind. The Cuban missile crisis (1962) that put Turkey on the frontline of the superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union was a case in point. And despite the end of the Cold War, and the growing interdependency between the two states led by Tayyip Recep Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin, respectively, have conflicting interests in Syria.

Since 2011, Erdoğan's goal has been to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Asad from power, while the Russians are doing their best to keep Asad in Damascus. From Ankara's perspective, Russia is using the war against the IS as a pretext to destroy the Syrian opposition and protect the Asad regime. Russia, for its part, claims that Turkey is aiding known jihadi groups, such as *Jaish al-Fatah* and *Jabhat al-Nusra*, as well as the IS, whose members include Chechen fighters that are hostile to Russia.<sup>1</sup> Ankara believes Russia airstrikes are destroying Turkey's clients among the Syrian opposition and undermining its political agenda in the region, which includes preventing the Syrian Kurds from establishing a contiguous autonomous zone from Afrin to Qamishli on Turkey's southern border. Russia's blatant targeting of Syria's Turkmen minority is also creating a domestic political problem for Turkey. In the framework of Erdoğan's "Neo-Ottomanism," Ankara feels responsible for the Muslim Turkmen, who were settled in the region by the Seljuk and Ottoman empires that preceded the modern Turkish state.<sup>2</sup>

Russia and Iran increased their direct military support for Bashar al-Asad in September 2015,<sup>3</sup> and some perceived Russia's intervention as a means to preempt Turkey and the U.S.-led coalition from creating a "no-fly" or "safe" zone along Turkey's southern border with Syria that would have shielded the anti-Asad rebels from the regime's air power.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ["Key terrorist leader reportedly killed by Russian airstrike in Syria,"](#) *Sputnik*, October 15, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Abdi Noyan Özkaya, "[Suriye Kürtleri: Siyasi Etkisizlik ve Suriye Devleti'nin Politikaları](#)" [Syrian Kurds: Political Ineffectiveness and policies of the state of Syria], *USAK Dergi*, Vol. 2, Number: 8 2007, p. 112.

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

<sup>4</sup> Sam Jones, "[Moscow scuppers US coalition plans for no-fly zone in Syria,](#)" *Financial Times*, October 4, 2015.

However, it appears the Russia-Turkey relationship had already started to fray.<sup>5</sup> In late 2014, Erdoğan called Putin to tell him that Turkey could no longer tolerate the scale of human slaughter taking place in Syria. Apparently, the call infuriated Putin, who warned Erdoğan to stay out of Syria's internal affairs.<sup>6</sup> In April 2015, after Turkey publicly criticized Russia's policies towards the Tatars in Crimea, Putin responded by publicly recognizing the Armenian genocide at a ceremony in Yerevan.<sup>7</sup> In June 2015, as Russia was laying the groundwork for its September military deployment to Syria, Putin and Erdoğan were said to have had a very uncomfortable meeting in a Baku hotel.<sup>8</sup> The split deepened further in August with Erdoğan's public declaration that Russia was willing to sacrifice Asad.<sup>9</sup> Putin allegedly responded by summoning the Turkish ambassador to Moscow, Ümit Yardım, to denounce Erdoğan, personally, and Turkey's policy in Syria, generally.<sup>10</sup>

In October 2015, tension between the two states moved from the diplomatic to the military sphere as a result of two incidents of Russian jets penetrating Turkish air space.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, it was not the first time Turkish air space had been violated during the Syrian war. In June 2012, a Turkish reconnaissance plane was shot down over the Mediterranean by an unidentified anti-aircraft missile. This event led Turkey to re-examine its rules of engagement along the entire Syrian border. As a result, in March 2014, a Syrian jet,<sup>12</sup> in May 2015 a Syrian helicopter,<sup>13</sup> and in October 2015 an unidentified unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV),<sup>14</sup> were shot down by the Turkish air force when they entered Turkish airspace without permission.

In the aftermath of Turkey's November 24 attack on the Russian bomber, there were immediate consequences on the ground in Syria. In order to close off Syrian air space, deter the Turkish air force, and maintain security for Russian planes

---

<sup>5</sup> Howard Amos, "[Russia-Turkey ties fray over Syria](#)," *The Moscow Times*, October 7, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Yelena Yegorova, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets – BBC World Monitoring*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Semih Idiz, "[Russia's Recognition of Armenian genocide strains ties with Turkey](#)," *Al Monitor*, April 28, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Paul J. Saunders, "[Putin, Erdogan meet face to face, but don't see eye to eye](#)," *Al Monitor*, June 19, 2015; Yelena Yegorova, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets – BBC World Monitoring*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Verda Özer, "[Erdogan believes Putin may give up on Syria's Bashar al-Assad](#)," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 3, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "[Moscow denies Putin called Erdogan 'dictator'](#)," *Anadolu Agency (AA – English)*, August 5, 2015; Yelena Yegorova, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets – BBC World Monitoring*, November 26, 2015; Dogu Ergil, "Trouble?," *Today's Zaman*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> "[Rus savaş uçakları Türk hava sahasını iki kez ihlal etti](#)," [Russian jets have violated the Turkish airspace twice], *NTV*, October 5, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> "[Sınır ihlali yapan Suriye uçağı düşürüldü](#)," [The Syrian jet that breached the border was shot] *Milliyet*, March 23, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> "[Başbakan Davutoğlu: Suriye helikopteri düşürüldü](#)," [Prime Minister Davutoğlu: Syrian helicopter was shot down] *Hürriyet*, May 16, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "[TSK: Suriye sınırında İHA düşürüldü](#)," [Turkish Armed Forces: UAV was shot in the Syrian border], *BBC Türkçe*, October 16, 2015.

and Asad's forces, Moscow deployed its most advanced air defense system (S-400) to the Hmeymim air base in Latakia and provided the Asad regime with the S-300 air defense system.<sup>15</sup> Russia also appears to be expanding its air force's presence in Syria, deploying additional planes at the T4 Syrian military airport (Tiyas) and the al-Sha'ayrat airport, both of which are located in the Homs area.<sup>16</sup> Russia's air force also targeted Turkish convoys<sup>17</sup> supplying the Turkmen in Northern Syria.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Russia has accused Turkey of purchasing the Islamic State's oil,<sup>19</sup> and Putin scolded Turkey's leadership for "Islamicizing" the country.<sup>20</sup> Russia also canceled the visa exemption agreement the two countries.<sup>21</sup> Yet apart from the saber rattling and the tit-for-tat war of words, Putin's took care to avoid escalating the incident into a direct confrontation that would involve NATO. In a speech to the Russian Federal Assembly, he alluded to scores that would be settled on Russia's terms. He said that if they [Turkey] "expected a nervous or hysterical reaction from us, if they wanted to see us become a danger to ourselves as much as to the world, they won't get it. They won't get any response meant for show or even for immediate political gain. They won't get it."<sup>22</sup> Russia opted for economic sanctions instead of a direct military response. Trade between Russia and Turkey had amounted to \$31.3 billion in 2013 and \$18.5 billion for the first 9 months of 2015,<sup>23</sup> and so the sanctions will undoubtedly have an effect on the Turkish economy. In particular, sanctions will hurt Turkey's agricultural exports to Russia (\$1.7 billion<sup>24</sup>), Russian tourism to Turkey (10 percent share of Turkey's tourism<sup>25</sup>), and the aviation industry. Moreover, Russia has also penalized Turkish long-haul trucks that use Russian territory for its

---

<sup>15</sup> "[Rusya o füzeleri yerleştirdi](#)," [Russia deployed that missiles], *Milliyet*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Elijah J. Magnier, "[Syria receives the S-300](#)," *al-Rai*, December 3, 2015; "[Russia denies moving into new airbases in Syria](#)," *The Moscow Times*, December 9, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> The supply convoys were organized by the İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH) - The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedom and Humanitarian Relief. The same organization that launched Mavi Marmara Gaza Flotilla against Israel.

<sup>18</sup> "[Russian airstrikes target aid convoy in northwestern Syrian town of Azaz, 7 killed](#)," *Daily Sabah*, November 25, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> "[Analysis: Putin rebukes Turkey's 'protection' of terrorists](#)," *Brics Post*, November 24, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> "[Putin: Turkish leadership's policy of encouraging 'Islamization' is a problem](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, November 25, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> "[Putin, Türkiye'ye özel ekonomik tedbirlerin uygulanması kararını imzaladı](#)" [Putin signed the decision that comprised special economic sanctions against Turkey] , *Milliyet*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Putin, "[Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly](#)," December 3, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> "[Türkiye-Rusya ekonomik ilişkileri](#)," [Turkish-Russian Economic Relations] Official Website of Republic of Turkey's Embassy in Moscow.

<sup>24</sup> "[Russia: No Turkish imports, we will import from Israel](#)," *YNet*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> "[İlk darbe turizme: En büyük Rus turizm şirketlerinden biri turlarını durdurdu](#)" [Tourism suffers the first strike: One of biggest Russian tourism operators stopped launching tours], *Diken*, November 24, 2015.

transit trade to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Mongolia, which led Turkey to use the Azerbaijan-Caspian Sea route to reach these states.

This wave of sanctions may just be the first phase of an approaching tsunami of economic reprisals. Turkey imports 54.76 percent of its natural gas from Russia.<sup>26</sup> Because Turkey's gas contracts with Russia are take-or-pay (meaning it either takes the agreed amount of Russia's gas or pays a penalty), it will be difficult for Turkey to cancel these contracts. On the other hand, Russia needs these revenues so it is unlikely to simply withdraw its supply. But what many Turks fear and anticipate is the "technical malfunction" that may just so happen to fall during the peak of winter and temporarily cut Russia's natural gas delivery to Turkey. Large joint energy infrastructure projects are being shelved, including the "Turkish Stream" gas pipeline. Moreover, Turkey's ambitious Akkuyu nuclear reactor that was to be built and financed by Russia is also in serious jeopardy.

Does this incident endanger the recent international effort to muster some kind of diplomatic solution to the Syrian war? In August 2015, Erdoğan raised Putin's ire by publicly suggesting Russia was ready to sacrifice Asad. Yet many, including Erdoğan, viewed Russia's military intervention in Syria in September as a sign that it was increasing its commitment to the Asad regime. In fact, it has been argued that Putin's steadfast commitment to Asad provides Russia with an opportunity to demonstrate its reliability as an ally, during a period where U.S. credibility has been questioned by some of its Middle East allies. In other words, Russia can show resolve in Syria where the U.S. is perceived as indecisive

But perhaps Russia's September intervention was less rigid and predetermined than these views suggest. Putin certainly intended to shore-up Asad's regime, but not necessarily to guarantee Asad his seat in power but rather to expand Russia's leverage and maneuverability.<sup>27</sup> Following two rounds of talks in Vienna in late October and mid-November, respectively, there is a new round of talks scheduled for December 18 in New York.<sup>28</sup> U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura told the Saudi financed newspaper *al-Hayat* that "wherever there is a political process to end a conflict... a kind of escalation in the military operations takes place to improve positions before the negotiations."<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Georgi Mirsky, chief researcher at the Russian Institute of World Economy and International

---

<sup>26</sup> "[Doğalgaz Piyasası Sektör Raporu](#)", T.C Enerji Piyasası Düzenleme Kurulu [Natural Gas Market Sector Report, Republic of Turkey Energy Market Regulation Council], Ankara, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Raghida Dergham, "[Da'esh's' arrogance hastens its end](#)," *al-Hayat*, November 19, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Somini Sengupta, "[New Peace Talks on Syria Could Be Held This Month](#)," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2015; Matthew Lee, "[Kerry: Next Syria meeting depends on 'flow of events'](#)," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Raghida Dergham, "[De Mistura urges opposition to unite](#)," *al-Hayat*, November 21, 2015.

Relations (IMEMO), recently argued there was no chance for a political settlement.<sup>30</sup>

Putin has proven to be a cagey tactician, opportunistically transforming the weakness or hesitation of others into Russia's gain.<sup>31</sup> Russia's September escalation, according to Fyodor Lukyanov, was Putin "acting true to form by making an unexpected decision that radically alters a seemingly unalterable set of circumstances."<sup>32</sup> The prospect of a serious negotiation in December may mean that Russia's increased involvement on the ground in Syria is part of Putin's effort to maximize Russia's bargaining position. If this is indeed the case, Russia's position on the Asad regime may be more negotiable than Putin's rhetoric would lead one to believe. After all, core Russian interests extend beyond the Asad regime, and it may be looking to parlay its leverage in Syria into greater gains elsewhere.

Whatever the case may be, it seems unlikely that the latest chapter between the tsar and the sultan is finished. In Putin's December 3 speech to the Russian Federal Assembly, he mused ominously that "if someone thinks they can commit a heinous war crime, kill our people, and get away with it, suffering nothing but a ban on tomato imports, or a few restrictions in construction or other industries, they're delusional. We'll remind them of what they did, more than once. They'll regret it. We know what to do."<sup>33</sup>

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

*[Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak](#) is a doctoral candidate in the [Zvi Yavetz Graduate School of History](#) and a Junior Researcher at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies \(MDC\)](#), [Tel Aviv University](#).*

**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

---

<sup>30</sup> Pavel Koshkin, "[In the fight against ISIS, perception trumps reality](#)," Russia-direct.org, December 7, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Aron Lund, "[Evaluating the Russian Intervention in Syria](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 7, 2015; Michael Kofman, "[The Russian Intervention in Syria: Policy Options and Exit Strategies](#)," October 21, 2015; Michael Kofman, "[How Russia's Gambit in Syria Changes the Game](#)," Warontherocks.com, September 21, 2015; Michael Kofman, "[Putin's Strategy is Far Better Than You Think](#)," Warontherocks.com, September 7, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "[Can Russia and the West cooperate in Syria?](#)" *The Moscow Times*, September 15, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Vladimir Putin, "[Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly](#)," December 3, 2015.

**To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.**

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at  
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to [listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il](mailto:listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il), with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."