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# Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater

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## ABSTRACT

Russia and Turkey have been involved in remarkable redefinitions of their foreign policies while navigating through turbulent times in the Post-Cold War era. This has manifested in a search of being recognized as a great power. The tragic civil war in Syria has been the theatre of these ambitions of these two states in highly controversial ways. They have been on the opposite sides until recently on the essential question of the regime change in that country. The risk of a direct fight has even been observed when Turkish air force got a Russian jet down. However, a rapid rapprochement started due to Turkish priority shift from the regime change to the prevention of Kurdish autonomy and the alienation from US; and Russian enthusiasm to get the cooperation of an ardent anti-regime NATO member like Turkey. It can be said that Russia and Turkey have been more process-oriented than result-oriented because they have been compelled to see the limits of their power and influence. As a result, they seem to prefer to focus on the process since they seem to reach their primary objective of showing their salience. All in all, one can only hope for a peaceful and democratic life for Syrians whom tremendously suffered also as a result of an imbroglio of all these global and regional powers' policies.

**Keywords:** Russian Foreign Policy, Turkish Foreign Policy, Syria, Activism

## Suriye Sahnesinde Etkin Rus ve Türk Dış Politikası

### ÖZET

Rusya ve Türkiye Soğuk Savaş sonrası çalkantılarda seyrini sürdürürken dış politikalarında dikkate değer yeniden tanımlamalara giriştiler. Bunun tezahürü büyük güç olarak kabul edilme arayışı oldu. Suriye'deki trajik iç savaş, bu iki devletin bu hedeflerinin gayet ihtilafli tezahürlerle gözlemlendiği bir alan oldu. Asal sorun olan bu ülkedeki rejim değişikliği üzerine yakın zamana kadar zıt taraflardaydılar. Hatta, Türkiye bir Rus askerî jetini düşürdüğünde doğrudan çatışma riskinden bile bahsedildi. Ancak, daha sonra hızlı bir yakınlaşma gözlemlendi. Bunun nedenleri Türkiye'nin önceliğinin rejim değişikliğinden Kürt özerkliğinin önlenmesine kayması ve ABD'ye karşı duyulan yabancılaşma ile Rusya'nın ateşli bir rejim karşıtı ve NATO üyesi olan Türkiye'nin işbirliğini sağlamak hevesiydi. Rusya ve Türkiye'nin, güçlerinin ve etkilerinin sınırlarını görmek zorunda kaldıklarından, sonuç odaklı olmaktan çok süreç odaklı oldukları söylenebilir. Dolayısıyla, sürece odaklanmayı tercih ettikleri izlenimi veriyorlar çünkü öncelikli amaçları olan vazgeçilmezliklerini göstermeyi başarmış görünüyorlar. Nihayetinde, bütün bu küresel ve bölgesel güçlerin siyasetleri nedeniyle de korkunç acılar çekmiş Suriyeliler için barışçıl ve demokratik bir yaşam ancak umut edilebilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rus Dış Politikası, Türk Dış Politikası, Suriye, Aktivizm

Russian Federation and Republic of Turkey have been through a striking redefinition of their foreign policies in the Post-Cold War era. In the 2010s, within the framework of the global economic and increasingly political crisis, they have both been ruled by a mentality obsessed with the ambition to have a great power status. This is rather keeping this status in the Russian case at least as inherited by the Soviet Union while acquiring it in the Turkish case. The transformation of so called Arab Spring protests in Syria into a tragic civil war has been the theatre of these ambitions for both states in highly controversial ways.

This article aims to analysis the turbulent Turkish-Russian relations in recent years, being shaped, more than anything else, under the multi-layered pressures of the Syrian crisis. Its main questions are: What are the key drivers of contention first and then rapprochement? What are the limits of Russian-Turkish reconciliation/cooperation while the factors of contention still prevail in Syria? For that aim, the article will approach Turkey's perception of Russian policies in the Middle East from a historical Turkish-Russian relations perspective of competition vs. cooperation, as well as Russian foreign policy perceptions and actions.

Russian foreign policy has substantially evolved in the post-Cold War era. It was marked by the so called Atlanticism in the 1990s, based on the cooperation with the US, Europe and international organizations. In that process, Russia perceived that it was not treated equally and fairly, particularly in the crisis in the Balkans. Thus, Atlanticism was replaced by Eurasianism.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1992, Russia's first Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev declared that Russia would have "a normal view of national interest" that would be in contrast to ideological Soviet foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Russian elite has apparently perceived in time that Atlanticism was not serving to Russian national interest. Russia's main claim has been to be recognized as a center of power with equal rights in multipolar world and having a say on discussions on the main topics of world politics.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework, geopolitics in measuring power, status and relative position of Russia in terms of hegemonic spatial control has become a crucial aspect of Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Russian national interest and security have been redefined in terms of geopolitical expansionism rather than the institutional cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

The main engine in this new foreign policy understanding has been the reform of the Russian army. This reform, to end the mass mobilization army of the Tsarist and Soviet regimes, indicated that the threat perception is from the south and coupled with its foreign policy aiming to be regionally focused.<sup>6</sup> Its effects could be observed in Ukraine and Crimea as *Near Abroad*, and in Syria that showed Russia acquired the capability of military intervention in distant geographies.<sup>7</sup> It seems insightful to remark that Russian elite's perception of the world is still at state-level and they perceive systemic level

1 Aleksandr Kubyshev and Aleksandr Sergunin, "The Problem of the 'Special Path' in Russian Foreign Policy", *Russian Social Science Review*, Vol.56, No.3, May-June 2015, p.32.

2 Natalia Morozova, "Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin", *Geopolitics*, No.14, 2009, p.668.

3 Dmitry Trenin, "Modernizing Russian Foreign Policy", *Russian Politics and Law*, Vol.49, No.6, November-December 2011, p.10.

4 Morozova, "Geopolitics, Eurasianism and Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin", p.671.

5 Ibid., p.675.

6 Gregory P. Lannon, "Russia's New Look Army Reforms and Russian Foreign Policy", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, No.24, 2011, p.28-30, 32.

7 Sıtkı Egeli, "Dost-Düşman-Dost Döngüsü ve Türkiye-Rusya Askeri Rekabetinin Dönüşümü", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk, Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017, p.166, 178.

behaviors, such as those by US, EU and even China, as further advancements of the interests of these particular states. From such state and geopolitics centered perspective, to consider army as the strongest foreign policy asset and military operations as the clearest foreign policy show of force seems as a natural corollary. To note, Russian success in reformation of its army stemmed from the revenue provided by price increases of energy resources that is its main export material.

Russian-Turkish relations have been subject to these developments. Turkish-Russian bilateral relations developed with a constant acceleration from the mid-1990s up to November 24, 2015, downing of the Russian military plane. Turkey and Russia, while considering each other rivals in all neighboring regions in the early 1990s, have changed their perceptions with the aim of establishing a 'new strategic partnership in the new century' and started to come closer with a focus to concentrate on the flip-side of relations. This meant Turkish decision-makers see Moscow as either supportive of Ankara's regional security or as an obstacle. Similarly, Russian authorities consider Turkey as either a locomotive of cooperation or an adversary preventing the advancement of Russian interests in its neighborhood. To briefly cite within this framework, the problems in Turkish-Russian relations in 1990s can be summarized as security, energy, and activity in Eurasia.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all, Turkish-Russian relations have witnessed increasing cooperation beginning with 1990s and then reached a conflictual stage in 2010s. Following its military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, Russia displayed a sort of encirclement that can be perceived as a security threat to Turkey.<sup>9</sup> From the other way round, it is observed that Russia got into conflict with countries important to its foreign policy, namely Ukraine, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup> As a result, 2010s marked the disagreements between Moscow and Ankara on a number of serious issues such as NATO missile defense shield, the military coup in Egypt, fight against ISIS, conflict in Ukraine, Crimean status referendum and the Syrian civil war. However, both countries tried to transcend these serious disagreements with a strategy called 'compartmentalization' in order to be able to continue the multidimensional cooperation that they started in 2000s.<sup>11</sup>

The Syrian civil war has been the showcase of this new activism in the foreign policies of both countries as well as the controversial character of their bilateral relations, being -at least- yet another apple of discord. Turkey has openly declared its policy for a regime change in Syria and enthusiastically acted with those who wanted to topple down the *Ba'ath* regime. To the exact opposite, Russia openly declared support to the regime including a full scale military involvement. Within a broader framework, it is argued that Russia seeks to present itself in the Middle East as a pragmatic, non-ideological, reliable, experienced player that is capable of diplomatic and military means.<sup>12</sup> Its involvement in the Syrian civil war signified not only its interests in the Middle East but also the show of force that Russia is as influential a great power as USA. It also displayed that its relations with Turkey is rather of secondary importance.<sup>13</sup>

8 Erel Tellal, "Avrasya'da Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri", Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.188.

9 Şener Aktürk, "Türkiye'nin Rusya ile İlişkilerinin Yükselişi ve Gerilemesi, 1992-2015, Neorealist bir Değerlendirme", Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.144

10 Alexander Duleba, "The 'New normal' In Russian Foreign Policy Thinking", *New Perspectives*, Vol.24, No.1/2016, p.124.

11 Emre Erşen, "2000'li Yıllarda Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri, 'Kısmatınlaştırmaya' Stratejisinin Sorunları", Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.147-148, 158.

12 Garcia, Henrique Alves, "Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy and the Middle East", *JANUS.NET e-journal of International Relations*, Vol.9, No.1, May-October 2018, p.117 (Accessed on 5 July 2018).

13 Erşen, "2000'li Yıllarda Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri" Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.158.

These adamantly opposite policies of Turkey and Russia in Syria clashed. However, both countries could curiously restore their relations to usual, mostly due to Turkish and American ambivalences. It seems best to analytically outline their story.

## Turkish-Russian Relations and Syria: Perspective in Brief

Turkish-Russian bilateral relations developed with a constant acceleration from the mid-1990s. The Turkish authorities have always considered Russia to be a counterweight to the West and have played the Russia card in their negotiations with Washington and Brussels on different issues. Despite promising relations between the two countries, it is not easy to say that the legacy of historic distrust between them has been successfully removed from their political relations. Ankara and Moscow could not manage to establish fully harmonious relations on some basic political issues such as the Kurdish issue, the Cyprus conundrum, or Armenia-related disagreements. Turkey's NATO membership and the complicated the European Union accession process have also been concerns for the Russian side.

In this regard, Turkey's recent cyclical alienation from the US and the EU has been a positive development from Moscow's point of view. Similar to the current political and security environment in the Middle East, Turkey has quarreled with its Western allies especially over Iraq and the Kurdish issue since the early 2000s; and this approach and attitude is shaping Ankara's policy toward Moscow. At the beginning of 2000s, Turkey disappointed US because of Ankara's reluctance to help topple Saddam Hussein, while the US alienated Ankara because of American forces' active engagement with the Kurds without considering Turkish consent. In March 2003, the Turkish parliament's rejection of the deal that would allow US troops to move through Turkey to open a northern front against Saddam, created a major crisis in Turkish-American relations. The decision was a severe blow to the US war plans, which Pentagon was compelled to change while troop ships waited offshore of İskenderun port. This was a turning point in US-Turkish military relations, which hit rock bottom when the Turkish Special Forces compound in Sulaymaniyah was stormed by their American counterparts. The US Special Forces humiliated the Turkish military by hooding the Turkish soldiers they apprehended. This event left a notable scar in the memory of the Turkish military as well. The current discomfort between CENTCOM and the Turkish Army in Syria and Iraq stems from almost 20 years ago, while the Kremlin often watching carefully.

Similarly, the lack of progress in Turkey-EU relations and problems between Russia and the EU regarding the urgency to fight against extremism, namely by Kurds and Chechens, contributed to changing perceptions. It is now apparent that both parties have started to see each other as potential partners with a capacity to open up bright futures in Eurasia. Indeed, Eurasianism often emerged as an alternative to be discussed in Turkish public opinion whenever there is an unwanted development in the relations with the EU. It seems that its weight is to continue as a result of controversial policies by the US.<sup>14</sup>

What turned friends into the worst of foes overnight in November 2015 with the downing of the Russian plane was mainly the two countries' uncompromising perspectives towards Syria. Syria had been the top political issue for Turkey and Russia since 2012. While Ankara remained dedicated to the idea of regime change in Damascus and continued to support opposition groups along its borders, Russia was determined from the beginning not to allow Syria to become another Libya, where

14 Tellal, "Avrasya'da Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri", Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.188, 200.

multilateral action led to regime change that was a step into the unknown, with Moscow remaining unwavering in its support for the Assad regime.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the Syrian quagmire within the bilateral relations, both actors failed to find a mutually acceptable solution to the war in Syria at the high-level discussions between the two countries during 2012-2015. It is even stated that one of the reasons of the massive Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war was Turkish ambition to penetrate, even militarily, into Syria through 'safe zones'.<sup>16</sup> Erdoğan's vibrant support for the Arab Spring and the uncompromising Turkish attitude concerning the Ba'ath regime in Syria have been the main obstacles to advancing Russian interests in Syria. As a result, Moscow conducted its first military intervention beyond the borders of former Soviet Union since the end of Cold War. Russia has seen the *Ba'ath* regime's survival as its main interest in Syria and Moscow has seen Iran as a natural and the most trustworthy regional partner in the flow of events.

On November 24, 2015, the downing of a Russian SU-24M tactical bomber by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet erased fifteen years of progress in bilateral relations within 20 seconds. A patriotic fury erupted in Russia that caught Ankara off guard. Putin warned of "serious consequences" for what he described as "a stab in the back" by "terrorist accomplices."<sup>17</sup> He commented, "It appears that Allah decided to punish Turkey's ruling clique by depriving them of wisdom and judgment."<sup>18</sup> The escalation in rhetoric was followed by a series of quick and harsh economic measures against Turkish companies and exports. Over the next days, the two countries effectively froze diplomatic ties, hostility prevailed in the public domain, and the absence of some four million Russian tourists dealt a significant blow to Turkey's tourism industry. Combined with the declining number of European tourists due to the Islamic State attacks, Turkish tourism suffered its worst period since the Iraq war. This crisis resulted in bilateral trade dipping to \$23.3 billion in 2015 from 31.5 billion in 2014.<sup>19</sup>

As a matter of fact, Ankara has displayed a sensitivity since the collapse of the Soviet Union in order not to harm pre-defined Turkish interests *vis-à-vis* Russia. For instance, Turkey maintained this cautious attitude toward the Russian War on Georgia in 2008 as well as during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict for the sake of not offending Russia, even after the invasion of Crimea. Nevertheless, the escalation of disagreements in the Middle East between these two countries, especially the so called 'plane incident', had direct negative consequences on the almost two-decade old Turkish-Russian *modus vivendi*. The increasing disagreements, competition, and insecurity in the region put any improvements in the political, economic and security-related arenas into a tight spot. At the same time, rising tensions between the West and Russia compromised the already delicate regional balance. Ankara appeared to be stuck in the middle.

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15 Asli Aydintasbas, "With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance", *ECFR Policy Brief*, June 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/with\\_friends\\_like\\_these\\_turkey\\_russia\\_and\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_an\\_unlikely\\_7048](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/with_friends_like_these_turkey_russia_and_the_end_of_an_unlikely_7048) (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

16 Gencer Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p. 270.

17 "Putin sırtımızdan bıçaklandık", *NTV*, 24 November 2015, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/putin-sirtimizdan-bicaklandik,fvChtoWKCUEUR1ywwGWxaQ> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

18 "Putin to Turkey: Expect more sanctions for jet shoot-down", *Reuters*, 3 December 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin/putin-to-turkey-expect-more-sanctions-for-jet-shoot-down-idUSKBN0TM0YF20151203> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

19 "Türkiye-Rusya Ticaret Hacminde Büyük Düşüş", *Milliyet*, 12 February 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/turkiye-rusya-ticaret-hacminde-buyuk-istanbul-yerelhaber-1209527/> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

The curious balance in Turkish-Russian relations, which was thought to be seriously damaged by plane incident, was impressively restored in less than a year. The night of July 15, 2016 has been the bloodiest and worrisome time of Turkish republican history due to a military coup attempt. On July 16, Turkish people woke up to a different country—one traumatized by the blood of the failed coup attempt. It had only been weeks since commentators had begun to speak of a normalization or reset of Turkish foreign policy, following the resumption of bilateral ties with Israel (for the first time since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010) and Russia (President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had just sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin, expressing his regrets for the downing of the Russian jet in November 2015). Erdoğan spoke of these changes in terms of a win-win approach for Turkey's relations with the world. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım hinted at cautious policy shifts *vis-à-vis* Iraq, Syria and Egypt as reflection of a new foreign policy after April 16, 2016, with the motto of “earning more friends than enemies.”<sup>20</sup> Immediate comments underlined within this respect the difficulty with improving relations with Russia.<sup>21</sup>

One month later, President Erdoğan paid his first visit abroad in the aftermath of the failed coup, to St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016. This visit marked a milestone in the bilateral relations between the two nations after an almost nine-month break, which can be labelled as the *annus horribilis* in Turkish-Russian relations. After their meeting in St. Petersburg, the two leaders highlighted their substantial and constructive dialogue on all issues of mutual interest and outlined a roadmap for restoring ties to a pre-plane incident level. Both leaders agreed that regional problems needed to be resolved through joint initiatives, implying that this should happen under the guidance of Turkey and Russia.<sup>22</sup>

Following the St. Petersburg meeting, the Russian chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, visited the Turkish capital Ankara on September 15, 2016. The Russian general's visit was the first top-level military-to-military contact after the two countries had worked out their differences over the downing of the Russian tactical bomber. Gerasimov was also the first Russian chief of the General Staff to visit Ankara after an 11-year lull. According to official statements, Gerasimov and his Turkish counterpart, General Hulusi Akar, discussed military developments in Eurasia. While Turkish military sources described the meeting as ‘fruitful’, most observers focused on the prospects of developing a common stand for the resolution of problems in the Middle East, namely the Syrian conundrum.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the ongoing normalization of bilateral relations, it seems that Turkey finally managed to secure an understanding with Russia on Syria, from which Moscow began to reap benefits beyond its southern borders. The turn of events in Syria and the operational developments

20 “Yapacağımız çok basit; dostlarımızın sayısını arttıracamız düşmanlarımız sayısını azaltacağız”, *Akşam*, 24 May 2016, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/basbakan-binali-yildirim-ak-parti-grup-toplantisinde/haber-518777> (Accessed on 29 March 2019).

21 Sami Kohen, “Daha çok dost, daha az düşman’ nasıl olacak?”, *Milliyet*, 27 May 2016. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sami-kohen/-daha-cok-dost--daha-az-dusman--nasil-olacak--2252304/> (Accessed on 29 March 2019).

22 “My Dear Friend Vladimir: Erdogan and Putin Back On Track”, *Moscow Times*, 9 August 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/turkey-54925> (Accessed on 29 March 2019); “Erdoğan and Putin discuss closer ties in first meeting since jet downing”, *The Guardian*, 9 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/erdogan-meets-putin-leaders-see-mend-ties-jet-downing-russia-turkey> (Accessed on 29 March 2019); Neil MacFarquhar, “Russia and Turkey Vow to Repair Ties as West Watches Nervously”, *The New York Times*, 9 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/world/europe/putin-erdogan-russia-turkey.html> (Accessed on 29 March 2019).

23 Orhan Coskun, “Top Russian general discusses Syria with Turkish counterpart”, *Reuters*, 15 September 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey/top-russian-general-discusses-syria-with-turkish-counterpart-idUSKCN11L014> (Accessed on 29 March 2019).

related to Operation Euphrates Shield, which the Turkish military launched to clear Syria's northern border area of extremists, could be seen as a reasonable clue for assuming that Ankara received a positive response from Moscow. Since then, the war in Syria was major focus of the leaders' discussion in each and every top-level meetings.

## **Russia in Syria and Turkish-Russian Relations**

From a Turkish point of view, Russia is one of the principal actors in defining regional stability and security in the Middle East since the Cold War years. Russia's main concern in the region is to consolidate and maintain its power while restricting the presence of the other powers. Moreover, as stated before, it has been salient part of its ambition to demonstrate its great power status. Naturally, this attitude is a reflection of Russian assertiveness in its neighborhood and has always been a concern for Turkish authorities. Among the other Middle Eastern countries, Syria has always been a priority for Russia. Russian influence in Syria was reduced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but Russia managed to hold on to its naval supply base of Tartus, which was established during the 1970s and continued to ship in arms and ammunitions to the regime's military forces. Russian support to the Syrian regime dramatically increased when the Arab Spring began in 2011. Russian-Syrian ties rapidly strengthened because of the legacy of the Cold War relationship and Syria, next to Iran, was perceived as a natural ally in the Middle East. In order to prevent unilateral Western involvement in the resolution of uprisings across the Middle East, Russia decided to take actively part in all those events. Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi's removal in 2011 is seen by Kremlin as direct undermining Russia's global role and influence in the Arab World. Russia failed to take control of the flow of events in Libya; so in order to show its decisive role in the Middle Eastern developments, Kremlin decided to get more involved in Syria. Putin's action was one of the direct ways of showing that Russia is a Great Power.<sup>24</sup>

When the first news of Russian military's operational build-up in Syria hit the headlines in Turkey in September 2015, Turkey started to feel the hindering impact of Russia's opposition to its policies in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Following a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu, in Sochi, on September 17, 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly expressed Russian doubts regarding Turkey's policies in Syria, especially when it came to the decision to join the US-led anti-ISIS and at the time, at least by implication, anti-Assad coalition.<sup>26</sup> This reaction was triggered by Turkey's decision to open the İncirlik Base, in Turkey's southern province of Adana, to the US military for operations against ISIS. In Russia's view, this act completely failed to take Moscow's concerns into account. However, in reality, there is little to suggest that the Turkish decision to grant access to the anti-ISIS coalition for İncirlik had much to do with Turkey's strategic calculus when it comes to creating a direct impact on Russian-US relations. Rather, the Turkish decision seems to have been moti-

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24 "Putin's Major Achievements, Decisions in 2015", *Sputnik International*, 25 December 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201512251032363220-putin-decision-2015/> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

25 Rob Crilly, "Russia is Building Military Base in Syria", *Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11846382/Russia-is-building-military-base-in-Syria.html> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

26 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments and answers to media questions following talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu, Sochi, 17 September 2015", [http://www.mid.ru/en\\_GB/vistupleniya\\_ministra/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/1756594](http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/vistupleniya_ministra/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/1756594) (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

vated by a concern related to Turkey's desire to harness international support for its own aspiration of establishing No-Fly zone in support of the opposition groups fighting against the al-Assad regime, largely modelled on the No-Fly zone established in Iraq following the First Gulf War. Moreover, it is argued that the attack against American diplomats in Benghazi can be considered as the beginning of the disagreement between US and Turkey on which groups to support in Syria.<sup>27</sup>

In that regard, the Turkish decisions of the period may be understood in terms of trying to secure the US support for its own agenda and priorities in Syria. Given the course of events, this seems like an exercise largely in vain due to a misreading of US prerogatives in Syria. In this context, and in line with the current state of Turkish-US relations, it is important to note that apparently large parts of Turkish society, and a number of opinion pundits close to the government in Turkey, have interpreted the situation as one that involved the deliberate misleading of Turkish foreign policy by the US. It also has to be noted that this rhetoric played a critical role in shaping the internal discourse in Turkey.

President Erdoğan's Moscow visit to open the renovated 111-year-old Grand Mosque, on September 23, 2015, served to remind Russia of Turkey's priorities in Syria. This speech marked Erdoğan's signaling his annoyance with Russia's stance directly and in front of a Russian public, for the first time:

Tolstoy, in another one of his stories, said that fire in a single house risks burning an entire village. We should analyze all developments in our region from that perspective. The flames in the Middle East must be extinguished with kindness, justice and conscience. That is why we have welcomed two million refugees and have been helping people on our territory for the past four years. The solution to the refugee issue is not closing borders but guaranteeing a peaceful life in their homes.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, Russian fighter jets soon began violating Turkish airspace around the province of Hatay and carried out coordinated air strikes against anti-regime forces in Syria, especially against Turkish-supported forces, including the Turkmens in the north of Syria, as of October 2015. These Russian violations were clearly undermining Turkey's self-declared rules of engagement after Syrian missiles shot down a Turkish Phantom jet off the Mediterranean coast in 2012; they signaled the possibility of a deadly encounter between these two parties. President Erdoğan's statement just after his return from Russia and before flying to Strasbourg to attend a counter-terrorism meeting organized by the Union of European Turkish Democrats in early October 2015 hinted at a further escalation of tensions:

Russian operations in Syria has nothing acceptable by Turkey. This situation leads Russia to a loneliness in the region in the course of events. Those steps taken by Russia despite Turkey makes us upset and irritated. Russia has no border with Syria. What is Russia trying to do here? It is doing so on the grounds that the Syrian regime demanded, but there is no obligation to perform such an operation upon regime's every demand.<sup>29</sup>

Russian military intervention initially focused on the Aleppo-Lazkiye line that Turkey suggested a "safe zone" and on the supply line between Turkey and Aleppo. In this sense, it was visibly against

27 Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Özcan, Balta and Beşgöl, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p. 271.

28 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin ile birlikte Moskova Merkez Camii'nin açılışını yaptı", *Hürriyet*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-putin-ile-birlikte-moskova-merkez-camiinin-acilisini-yapti-30146277> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

29 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan Rusya Açıklaması", *NTV*, 4 October 2015, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-rusya-aciklamasi,rmUYtZDD3EK574I6kpw11A> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

Turkish designs in Syria. As a result, Turkish strategy to form a 'safe zone' on Aleppo-Lazkiye line was completely destroyed.<sup>30</sup> It was during this period that Erdoğan started to talk with a raised tone of voice after NATO condemned the increasing violations of Turkish airspace:

There are those who are sensitive to the Syrian crisis, ending of the war, and the resignation of Assad and there are those who are not. A person who committed a state terror and caused the death of 350 thousand people is now ruling Syria but there are those who are trying to protect him. Iran is one of them. Russia is another one. Here what Russia has done in Syria, an effort to establish a base for itself there, and moreover, the violations of our borders. This has met a stern NATO ultimatum yesterday. We cannot endure it. Some steps that we do not desire are being taken. It is not convenient for Turkey to accept them. This is also beyond the principles of NATO. NATO has shown its standpoint because an attack against Turkey is an attack against NATO, it must be known as such. Our [good] relations with Russia are obvious. But if Russia loses a friend like Turkey with whom it has cooperated on many issues, it would lose a lot, it should know it.<sup>31</sup>

Such declarations heralded Turkey's realization, once again, that in the face of increasing disagreement and harassment of Turkey's airspace by Russia, the only balancing act could come from its traditional alliances. As such, it again marked an ambivalence or oscillation in Turkish foreign policy, particularly regarding Syria. In addition, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that Turkey's engagement rules were valid against whoever violates its airspace, including Syria, Russia or another country. Davutoğlu also asserted that Russia assured Turkey that its airspace would not be violated again. He felt the necessity to underline that Russia has been a neighbor and a friend, that there was not tension between Turkey and Russia and that Syrian question was not a Russian-Turkish crisis.<sup>32</sup>

A possible message from those statements was Turkey's readiness to take the risk of even suspending bilateral relations with Russia for the sake of realizing Ankara's priorities in Syria. Nevertheless, despite the nominal support of its NATO allies against certain security concerns, Turkey failed to convince its Western partners to advance its interests in Syria, including establishing mechanisms to respond to the growing ISIS threat and creating security zones by enforcing No-Fly zone in northern Syria.

In November 2015, Russia increased its aggressive air strikes against Turkish-backed opposition groups in Idlib and Latakia, in particular in the Jebel Turkman region. Suddenly, the position of Turkmen opposition forces became a major topic in the Turkish media and the issue morphed in the popular imagination with "Russians attacking Turkmens," especially in the pro-government media.<sup>33</sup> Both Prime Minister Davutoğlu and President Erdoğan made passionate pleas about the plight of the Turkmens and the bombardment of civilians, publicly calling on Russia to halt its campaign. The Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, was summoned to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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30 Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p. 291-92.

31 "Rusya Türkiye'yi kaybederse çok şey kaybeder", *TRT Haber*, 6 October 2015, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/rusya-turkiyeyi-kaybederse-cok-sey-kaybeder-207330.html> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

32 "Başbakan Ahmet Davutoğlu: Angajman kurallarımız belli", *NTV Haber*, 5 October 2015, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/basbakan-ahmet-davutoglu-angajman-kurallarimiz-belli,Q3xXBQqSIEOWFitKph7GQg> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

33 For instance, "Türkmendağı Katliamı", *Yeni Şafak*, 20 November 2015, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/turkmendaagi-katliami-2343850> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

on November 19, 2015, and warned of the consequences, while Ankara tried to enlist NATO support over repeated Russian violations of its airspace.<sup>34</sup>

While the Russian media was enjoying the spectacle of a resurgent military fighting against ‘terrorists’ and ‘jihadists’ in Syria, the Turkish public became polarized: pro-government newspapers focused on the plight of the Turkmens and complained of Russian-Kurdish connections, while the opposition expressed the collapse of Turkey’s Syria policy.<sup>35</sup> Ankara decided to take its case regarding the bombardment of Turkmen civilians to the United Nations. But events on the ground were moving faster than policies.<sup>36</sup> The Russian/Syrian advances were successful in repelling opposition forces. In a front-page headline on November 21, 2015, pro-government newspaper *Yeni Şafak* reported: “Turkmen Mountain Falls!”<sup>37</sup>

The aforementioned flow of events in the final months of 2015 at last brought two parties to the ‘plane incident’ on November 24. This new stage in Turkish-Russian relations was a historic event for Russia and, as previously mentioned, President Putin described the incident as “a stab in the back” by “terrorist accomplices.”<sup>38</sup> He warned of “serious consequences” as “It appears that Allah decided to punish Turkey’s ruling clique by depriving them of wisdom and judgment.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it may be argued that Putin administration has become even more furious when Ankara called NATO to an urgent meeting following the incident, as if a Turkish plane was got down by a Russian plane. However, Erdoğan administration could not get what they wanted from NATO; US and NATO behaved in a way to deescalate the crisis in contrast to the possibility of a Turkish effort to escalate it.<sup>40</sup>

Despite strong statements by top Turkish officials, neither the Russian authorities nor Turkey’s Western allies were anticipating such a strong response from Turkey. As a matter of fact, it is still a tough endeavor to answer the question why two countries, despite the existence of official mechanisms to swiftly bring top decision makers together, failed to apply the tradition of “concentrating on the flip-side of relations” on this matter. For a long time, the two parties sustained their relations on the principle of compartmentalization—that is, geopolitical issues and economic cooperation were segregated as not only separate but distinctive agendas. Such a low prioritization of geopolitics looks strange when one considers the strategic cultures of both parties, which are heavily laden by grand

34 Deniz Zeyrek, “Turkey warns Russia over border security”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-warns-russia-over-border-security-91568> (Accessed on 28 March 2019). Ambassador Karlov was assassinated by a Turkish policeman to protest at Russia’s involvement in Aleppo on December 19, 2016. The incident happened a day after protests in Turkey over Russian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Both leaders, Erdoğan and Putin agreed that the incident was an act of provocation aimed at disrupting the normalization of bilateral ties and peace process in Syria.

35 For example, Yılmaz Bilgen, “Türkmenlere işkence”, *Yeni Şafak*, 31 December 2015, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/turkmenlere-iskence-2378264> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); “Türkiye’nin Suriye politikası çöktü!” *Yeniçağ*, 26 November 2015, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/turkiyenin-suriye-politikasi-coktu-125987h.htm> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

36 Aydıntaşbas, *With Friends Like These*.

37 “Türkmen Dağı Düştü!” *Yeni Şafak*, November 21, 2015 <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/turkmen-dagidustu-2344150> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

38 “Putin çok ağır konuştu: Terör işbirlikçileri tarafından sırtımızdan bıçaklandık”, *Diken*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/putin-cok-agir-konustu-teror-isbirlikcileri-tarafindan-sirtimizdan-bicaklandik/> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

39 “Uçak krizi patladığından beri Erdoğan ve Putin neler söylediler?”, *CNN Turk*, 30 November 2015, <http://www.cnnturk.com/dunva/ucak-krizi-patladigindan-beri-erdogan-ve-putin-neler-sovlediler?page=5> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

40 Özcan, “Rusya’nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye”, Özcan, Balta and Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p. 289.

geopolitical narratives. Expectedly, in an environment where geopolitics had returned to the agenda, it did so in an overwhelming manner, threatening the real previous gains regarding bilateral trade and energy relations. One should consider the increasing importance of geopolitics based national interest understanding in Russian foreign policy, as presented in the introduction of this article.

As a matter of fact, the first serious signs of Turkish-Russian political disagreements emerged just after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Turkey declared Russia's annexation as illegal and the referendum illegitimate, and thus Ankara does not recognize the *de facto* situation in Crimea.<sup>41</sup> Turkish commentators questioned the limits of Turkish-Russian relations when Moscow is acting aggressively in Turkey's close neighborhood.<sup>42</sup> Syrian case has certainly been much more aggravated on the grounds of its priority in Turkish foreign policy under Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. It seems ripe now to move to the analysis of domestic and external factors of Turkish relations with Russia as far as the Syrian crisis was concerned.

## **The Domestic Factors**

When the plane incident happened in late 2015, Turkey had already been facing controversial domestic developments that negatively affected the political stability within the country. As mentioned above, Erdoğan and his ruling party enthusiastically supported the Arab Spring. However, this support turned bitter in 2013, after the start of the Gezi Protests across Turkey. Moreover, second Tahrir Square protests in Egypt led to the collapse of the Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government that was supported by Erdoğan. It was like a signal to the Erdoğan government to take an unsympathetic tone toward mass protests, particularly in Turkish streets. Erdoğan leadership and pro-government media has taken a particularly harsh stance against the protests and began to allege 'foreign involvement' in all those events, which they still do as their current discourse in November 2018 has shown. The reservations by Turkish authorities toward popular street demonstrations were enhanced with the Ukrainian Maidan protests in February 2014.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that both Erdoğan and Putin have been suspicious about democratic protests on the ground of their links with 'the West'. It can be argued Putin has been more categorical thus consistent in this standpoint since Erdoğan supported those in Arab Spring, particularly against Mubarak in Egypt considering that it will pave the way for the government of Muslim Brotherhood.

Erdoğan presented the establishment of direct presidential system as a solution to the alleged unstable political environment in Turkey. He was elected President of the Turkish Republic with 51.8 percent of the votes on August 10, 2014, in the first ever direct presidential elections since the establishment of the Republic. Turkish foreign policy has been influenced by this ambition to regime change, as framed also within a Middle Eastern context ranging from Egypt to Syria.

41 See Turkish Foreign Ministry's statements e.g. "Kırım'da Düzenlenen Referandum Hakkında", No.86, 17 March 2014, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-86\\_-17-mart-2014\\_-kirim\\_da-duzenlenen-referandum-hk.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-86_-17-mart-2014_-kirim_da-duzenlenen-referandum-hk.tr.mfa) (Accessed on 26 March 2019); "Kırım'daki Son gelişmeler Hk.", No.77, 6 March 2014, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-77\\_-6-mart-2014\\_-kirim\\_daki-son-gelistmeler-hk.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-77_-6-mart-2014_-kirim_daki-son-gelistmeler-hk.tr.mfa), (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

42 Aktürk, "Türkiye'nin Rusya ile İlişkilerinin Yükselişi ve Gerilemesi", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.144.

43 Some examples of the comparison between Gezi and Maidan in Turkish opposition media see <https://m.bianet.org/biamag/toplum/155557-gezi-ve-ukrayna-ayaklanmalari-benzerlikler-farkliliklar> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/50389/AKP\\_nin\\_Ukrayna\\_Politikasinda\\_Gezi\\_Etkisi\\_.html#](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/50389/AKP_nin_Ukrayna_Politikasinda_Gezi_Etkisi_.html#) (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

Kurdish question, which has often been a critical issue in Turkish domestic and foreign policy, has been resumed within this process. Erdogan had pursued a policy of social reconciliation and launched a policy of ‘Kurdish Opening’ during his term as prime minister. He moved even further into the negotiations with the PKK, also with reference to the presidential system. This led to a peaceful period since PKK suspended attacks and even withdrew its forces. However, the detente ended in July 2015 following two years of relative calm, with the news of PKK members killing Turkish policemen and soldiers in a new spiral of violence that started with a suicide bomb attack by ISIS to a Turkish socialist youth organization carrying humanitarian help to besieged Kobane/Ayn al-Arab<sup>44</sup>. That is to mark the Turkish foreign policy towards Syria and hence its relations with Russia.

The reasons behind PKK’s reversal of its strategy might be summarized as follows: Firstly, with the increasing achievements of its Syrian affiliate, the PYD, in northern parts of Syria, the terrorist organization apparently saw an opportunity to position itself as an international political actor. The active cooperation with the US in the latter’s campaign against ISIS in Syria emboldened PKK. Another important factor might have been linked to US materiel support and military training, so PKK felt its capabilities and fighting skills enhanced. It also apparently felt that there was room to build on the public credibility it had garnered fighting against ISIS in Syria and leverage its reputation. This element was thought to work for increasing its support in the West. Another potentially influential element was the PKK’s fall-out with KRG President Masoud Barzani. PKK felt that, after expelling ISIS, it could secure territorial domination that could not only provide a logistics base alternative to long standing Kandil, but could also serve as a test case for its vision of a political order.<sup>45</sup>

Following the formation of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), as the political party of the Kurdish political movement in cooperation with some Turkish leftists, and especially its’ strong performance in the June 2015 general election, the military cadre of the PKK in Kandil seems to have felt that it was losing the initiative in dominating the ‘Kurdish cause’ in Turkey. In the immediate aftermath of June elections, as the HDP significantly increased its votes and enlarged the traditional electoral base of the Kurdish movement, a renewed discourse around the HDP becoming a ‘Party of Turkey’—rather than a single agenda of ethnic political identity—was taking shape. The leadership of the PKK seems to have taken little, if any, pleasure from that development, which simply fueled its appetite for a renewed militarization of its conflict with Turkey. Under the impact of these factors, the PKK started a new urban campaign called the ‘war of ditches and barricades’. The Turkish government’s quick response was to return to traditional harsh military methods: specifically, the Turkish security forces stormed urban centers such as Sur, Silopi and Cizre in southeastern Turkey to prevent the PKK, which benefited from the negotiation process to settle in the urban areas as it had always dreamt of, from becoming entrenched there.

44 “Suruc massacre: Mass funeral for Turkey bombing victims”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33615239>, BBC, 21 July 2015 (Accessed on 2nd April 2019).

45 Some examples: “PKK leader: Turkey is protecting IS by attacking Kurds”, BBC, 10 August 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33818282> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); Richard Spencer, “PKK urges US to mediate in its war with Turkey and admits to secret talks with Washington”, *The Telegraph*, 17 August 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11806481/PKK-urges-US-to-mediate-in-its-war-with-Turkey-and-admits-to-secret-talks-with-Washington.html> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); “KCK Eş Başkanı Cemil Bayık: Kürtler eski kürtler değil”, *BBC Türkçe*, 1 December 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdluYzYGRw> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); Hevidar Ahmed, “Exclusive interview with PKK commander in Shingal, Agid Civian”, *Rudaw*, 15 August 2016, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/15082016> (Accessed on 26 March 2019); “Kurdish separatist leader Murat Karayilan’s interview”, *Al Jazeera*, 17 October 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVOXExsyzFk> (Accessed on 26 March 2019).

Ankara's renewed understanding of the security, combined with its growing fight against terrorism from different and even opposing organizations such as PKK and ISIS within Turkey's borders, had a foreseeable spill-over effect on Turkish policymaking on Syria. When Russian forces arrived to the war-torn country, the Syrian issue had already become a fervent domestic matter of concern in Turkey, interwoven with the fight against PKK, and often depressing situation of Syrian refugees in the country. Moreover, the Turkish government heavily used this argument of pairing ISIS with the PYD/PKK as a strategy to delegitimize the PKK's image in the West; Ankara's goal was to have the PYD in Syria also included in the list of internationally recognized terrorist targets.

Nevertheless, the political disagreements between Turkey and the US and, of course, with Russia for a time prevented Turkish forces from deploying beyond the country's borders in any land or air operations—Turkey's military was limited to cross-border artillery fire against all attacks from northern Syria. All in all, Turkish foreign policy towards Syria, which would include military involvement and serious fighting, as well as its relations with US and Russia have been influenced by domestic factors such as Erdoğan's aim of regime change, new phases in older Kurdish question, and a number of violent terrorist attacks by PKK and ISIL also in Turkish big cities truly far from Syrian border.

## **The External Factors**

Turkish nationalist and conservative political and security circles, like many of their fellows in the world, have traditionally believed in the constant existence of external forces that continually seek to disperse and destroy Turkey. Therefore, they allege, it is always indispensable to defend the Turkish state and territorial integrity against this danger. For these circles, the foreign, including Western, powers are continually looking to weaken and carve up Turkey. Russia's attitude indifferent to Turkish government's calls, even after the aforementioned open calls by Erdoğan for joint operations in Syria as well as the US's prioritization of the PYD/YPG/PKK role in its anti-ISIS campaign were seen as 'evidence' of these intentions.

The most striking example of this robust narrative was the famous phrase 'precious loneliness', penned by President Erdogan's chief policy adviser, Ibrahim Kalın. These words were meant to express Turkey's 'honorable stance' against coups and slaughters, as opposed to the world's ignorance of the conflicts in Egypt and Syria.<sup>46</sup> During the early years of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, Turkey embraced the foreign policy perspective of Ahmet Davutoglu, characterized by the motto 'zero problems with neighbors'. But in time, Turkey had problems with most of its neighbors. Notably, it fell out with Israel, Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq (in addition to long standing disputes with Greece and Armenia) and saw its friendly relations with its Western partners challenged by a lack of trust and common ground. Russia might be singled out as the only significant foreign actor that did not enforce pre-conditions on Turkey when it came to deepening strategic and economic relations. This could have been what is called 'compartmentalization' in the bilateral relations of these two countries, as well as Russian renewed foreign policy behavior as presented in the introduction of this article.

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46 "Turkey not 'lonely' but dares to do so for its values and principles, says PM adviser," *Hürriyet*, 26 August 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-not-lonely-but-dares-to-do-so-for-its-values-and-principles-says-pm-adviser-53244> (Accessed on 28 March 2019)

## Further Developments

Following the November 2015 downing of the Russian jet, Turkish leaders approached the situation with rather a blend of self-confident and conciliatory tone, putting forward a narrative of defending Turkey's basic right to secure its borders. Meanwhile, the tone in pro-government media was less restrained and presented a view that 'foreign powers' want to destroy Turkey's territorial integrity and international reputation. For some, "Turks taught Putin a lesson and Erdoğan destroyed Putin's charisma as a world leader' or 'Turkish eagles warned Russia like this'. Some columnists even welcomed the plane incident as a clear sign that Turkey was becoming increasingly free in its foreign policy for the first time since the Cold War. In one example, it is even said that "Turkey is making its own way [...] it is constructing and defending its own position...Erdoğan's and Davutoğlu's self-confident and down-to earth new foreign policy perspectives are behind this success."<sup>47</sup>

However, the flow of events has shown a different picture. First of all, the incident sparked animosity in Russia. The Russian media ran negative reports and accused Ankara of supporting ISIS, even claiming that Erdoğan and his family were involved in reselling ISIS oil.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Russia targeted Turkey with economic sanctions. The tourism, agriculture, construction, and to a lesser degree, energy sector felt the direct results of these actions. Both countries' unique approaches to 'greatness' and similar eternal threat perception from the outside world were fully on display.

Saliently within the focus of this article, Russia's emergence as a decisive factor in shaping the key outcomes of the Syrian conflict made Turkey's situation more fragile, particularly as far as the Kurdish factor was concerned. Russia is militarily superior to Turkey and this also defined the perception of Russian authorities.<sup>49</sup> Russia, along with the US, intensified its contacts with both Turkish and Syrian Kurds and thus, undermined Turkey's room for maneuver in Syria. Within a month of the incident, the Russian media began reporting on the Kurdish question and the plight of the Kurds inside Turkey and in Syria, discarding the former tacit agreement between Ankara and Moscow to stay clear of Kurdish and Chechen issues. Moreover, in January 2016, the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, publicly supported a petition signed by Turkish academics condemning human rights abuses in Ankara's fight against PKK. In a surprise move, Russia also extended a warm welcome to the HDP, and invited its leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow that December. The meeting marked the beginning of a series of contacts

47 Yıldırım Oğur, "Hayır diyebilen hatta jet düşürebilen Türkiye", *Türkiye*, 25 November 2015, <https://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/yazarlar/yildirim-ogur/588965.aspx> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

48 Some examples: "Foul Play: Turkey May Have Always Been Supporting ISIL", *Sputnik International*, 25 November 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201511251030724153-turkey-isil-support/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Daesh Leader's Mobile Phone Holds Proof of Turkey's Support", *Sputnik International*, 23 December 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201512231032175304-isil-mobile-phone-turkey/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Russia Hopes for Turkish Support in Fight Against Islamic State – Bogdanov", *Sputnik International*, 15 October 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201510151028578805-Russia-Turkey-ISIL/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Siding with ISIL? Turkey Spotted Dealing with Radical Islamists in Syria", *Sputnik International*, 24 November 2015 <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201511241030667934-turkey-funding-arming-isil-alqaeda-oil-smuggling/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Financing ISIL: 'Some Turkish Businessmen Involved in Selling Oil'", *Sputnik International*, 02 November 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201511021029498413-isil-oil-trade-profit-turkey/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Downing of Russian Jet Shows Turkey's Support for Jihadists, Oil Profiting", *Sputnik International*, 26 November 2015 <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201511261030779073-su-24-russia-turkey-isil/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

49 Ege, "Dost-Düşman-Dost Döngüsü ve Türkiye-Rusya Askeri Rekabetinin Dönüşümü", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül, (Eds.) *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, p.166, 178.

between Moscow and Kurdish groups; Syrian Kurds were even invited to open offices in Moscow. These developments clearly signaled to Turkey that the linkage and balance established between the Kurdish and Chechen issues was broken under the weight of the two countries' differences in Syria that had reached a climax with the downing of the Russian SU- 24M. At this stage, Turkey found its hands tied and, therefore, turned and found refuge in its traditional alliances.

The immediate impact of the deterioration in Turkish-Russian relations was Turkey's quick U-turn to its historical allies—the US and NATO. As was the case just after the Second World War, when Soviet territorial claims pushed Turkey toward the West and opened a path to NATO membership, Turkish authorities immediately asked their Alliance partners for solidarity and protection against a probable Russian assault. Although Ankara was unable to persuade NATO to evoke the Article 5 on collective defense, the North Atlantic Alliance expressed its support for Turkey's territorial integrity. Ankara felt the need to return to the Western security architecture rather than 'going it alone', as per the idea penned by İbrahim Kalın at the height of the Arab Spring.

The domestic developments were also not promising in those days. Erdoğan's expectations to establish a direct presidential political system that clarified the powers of the head of state, as well as his need and to achieve the 'Turkey 2023' program, necessitated a decisive shift in power. In order to facilitate a brand-new domestic and foreign policy, Erdoğan enhanced his cooperation with Turkish nationalist circles, intensified his fight against the so-called 'parallel state' of Gulenist movement and, replaced Davutoğlu with a new AKP chairman and prime minister, Binali Yıldırım, in May 2016. Prime Minister Yıldırım hinted quickly at policy shifts *vis-a-vis* Iraq, Syria, and Egypt as a reflection of a new Turkish foreign policy after April 16, 2016. The government's new foreign policy motto would be 'earning more friends than enemies' reminiscent of 'zero problems with neighbors' (by Ahmet Davutoğlu) and its rather opposite outcome.

As a reflection of this new foreign policy perspective, Ankara first initiated talks with Israel to normalize bilateral relations.<sup>50</sup> Then, in order to mend bilateral ties between Ankara and Moscow, President Erdoğan sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin expressing regret for the downing of the Russian Su-24. Erdoğan, in his letter, expressed Turkey's readiness to restore relations with Moscow by calling Russia "a friend and a strategic partner".<sup>51</sup> Prime Minister Yıldırım –though inconsistently– noted that Ankara could compensate Russia for the downing of the plane.<sup>52</sup>

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50 "Statement of the Spokesman of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tanju Bilgiç, in Response to a Question Regarding The Appointment of Ambassador to Israel", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2016, <http://stockholm.emb.mfa.gov.tr/Mission/ShowAnnouncement/323155> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Turkey, Israel sign deal to normalize ties after six years", *Reuters*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-israel-idUSKCN0ZE0P5> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

51 "Erdoğan expressed regret for downing of Russian jet in letter to Putin: Kremlin", *Daily Sabah*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/06/27/erdogan-expressed-regret-for-downing-of-russian-jet-in-letter-to-putin-kremlin> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Erdoğan's Letter to Putin Included Both Words of Regret, Apology", *Sputnik International*, 28 June 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201606281042066246-ergodan-putin-su-24/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Erdoğan apologizes to Putin over death of Russian pilot, calls Russia 'friend & strategic partner'", *RT*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/348562-putin-erdogan-turkey-pilot/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin'e mektup gönderdi", *TRT Haber*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-putine-mektup-gonderdi-258503.html> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

52 "Erdoğan expressed regret for downing of Russian jet in letter to Putin: Kremlin", *Daily Sabah*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/06/27/erdogan-expressed-regret-for-downing-of-russian-jet-in-letter-to-putin-kremlin> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Yıldırım: Gerekirse Rusya'ya tazminat veririz", *BBC Türkçe*, 28 June 2016, [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160627\\_yildirim\\_rusya\\_israil](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160627_yildirim_rusya_israil) (Accessed on 28 March 2019);

This foreign policy behavior is a sea change following the plane incident. Moreover, an increased number of ISIS attacks on Turkish soil and the failed July 2016 coup attempt further distracted Ankara from Syria and quickened the pace of events in the direction of rapprochement with Moscow. Erdoğan administration moved to these steps because of Ankara's perceived lack of Western support in tackling the attempted coup. Turkey remained upset and strongly critical of the US and EU response to the coup attempt, while Russia saw it as an opportunity to provide a supportive shoulder.

Furthermore, while fight against PKK terrorism was continuing, prevention of PYD/YPG/PKK expanding their operations west of the Euphrates became a new red line for Turkey. Meanwhile, the American insistence on cooperating with the PYD on the battlefield, together with Washington's continued arming of the Syrian Kurdish forces even with heavy equipment, and the appearance of pictures in the Turkish media of US special operations forces wearing the insignia of YPG in Syria were accepted as tangible signs of American support for separatist Kurdish groups. Turkish public opinion started to regard the PYD/YPG as the US "combat boot" in Syria, which aims to establish a Kurdish state along the Southern borders of Turkey. In this sense, Russian cautious attitude, also fed by strong American involvement with PYD against common enemy ISIS, helped the amelioration of Turkish-Russian relations.

Increasing anti-US sentiment in public opinion contributed to the Turkish government's search for a new partner on the Syrian issue. Under these undesirable circumstances, a well-known historical 'lesser evil', Russia, emerged as a balancer to realize Turkey's interests in Syria. Russia, despite its declared support for Baath regime, which initially contributed to the souring of Turkish-Russian relations, now appeared as a much better alternative to the 'pro-separatist PYD supporter'—the United States. Turkish pro-government media has often celebrated the expressions of concern by Russian authorities on the American involvement in "East of Euphrates".<sup>53</sup> The Russian choice also prevented Turkey's isolation in the region by bringing Iran into the equation. Iran had always been a potential natural ally for Turkey when it came to the Kurdish issue. As a result, Turkey's old rivals, Iran and Russia, though key backers of Syrian regime, rapidly became Ankara's new allies against the US-led coalition in Syria. To note, Erdoğan administration repeated from time to time its uneasiness with the Syrian regime.

The launch of *Operation Euphrates Shield* by the Turkish Armed Forces, on August 24, 2016, was the most tangible result of this Turkish-Russian rapprochement. The operation's main objectives were to maintain border security and confront ISIS terrorism within the framework of the UN Charter. The Turkish authorities were also targeting the PKK terrorist organization and its affiliates, the PYD/YPG, by saying that the terrorists "will not be allowed to establish a corridor of terror on Turkey's doorstep."<sup>54</sup> *Operation Euphrates Shield* is being conducted in coordination with the US

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"Binali Yıldırım: Rusya'ya tazminat ödenmesi söz konusu değil", *NTV*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/binali-yildirim-rusyaya-tazminat-odenmesi-soz-konusu-degil,ZYDR1R9r7U6WpexjASO8zQ> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

53 A recent example: "Rusya Fırat'ın doğusundaki gelişmelerden endişeli", *Yeni Şafak*, 10 October 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/rusya-firatin-dogusundaki-gelismelerden-endiseli-3401296> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

54 "149th day of Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria, 16 Daesh terrorist killed", *Daily Sabah*, 19 January 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/01/19/149th-day-of-operation-euphrates-shield-in-northern-syria-16-daesh-terrorist-killed> (Accessed on 28 March 2019); "Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and gains", *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains/730531> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

and Russia, but the main factor that has allowed Turkey to carry it out was the normalization of relations with Russia. Specifically, Turkey was able to reach a tacit agreement with Russia that enabled Turkish forces to operate in and near Syrian airspace. Russian cooperation has been persistent, since for the Turkish military campaign in Syria to proceed, Russia first had to ease its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) measures against Turkey. Turkish-Russian coordination has enabled Turkey to act with a relatively free hand in Syria after an interruption of months. Ultimately, *Euphrates Shield* allowed the Turkish army to embed itself in Syria and create a buffer zone preventing PYD/YPG from gaining strategic depth and expanding its area of influence to Turkey's borders west of the Euphrates River. The operation also contributed positively to the Turkish army's shattered morale after the coup attempt and distracted the military's attention from domestic political issues to external, security-related priorities. Turkey restored its' role as an actor able to secure its borders via land and air operations through Operation Euphrates Shield. Turkish forces took control of the Azaz, Jarabulus, Al-Bab triangle and hence, has become a military force on the ground, giving it greater claim to negotiate.

The diplomatic corollary of this Turkish military operation has been Turkey's role in the Astana peace process, held in the Kazakhstani capital. After almost a year, Turkish officials managed to find an effective position for Turkey in the diplomatic arena and, together with their Russian and Iranian counterparts, issued a joint statement in Moscow on December 20, 2016, in which the parties declared that they agreed on the steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict.<sup>55</sup> The three governments declared their support for the territorial integrity of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and non-sectarian Syrian Arab Republic and called for a non-military solution to the Syrian conflict under UNSC Resolution 2254. More importantly, Turkey, together with Russia and Iran, declared its readiness to facilitate and become the guarantor of the prospective agreement/peace accord being negotiated between the Syrian government and the opposition. This approach is a clear elevation of Turkey's diplomatic status in the resolution of the Syrian issue since the start of the civil war. Initial endeavor to regime change in line with American policy has ironically evolved to get a new role with two major supporters of that same regime. Turkey's position shifted significantly as a result of the Astana process, although Ankara is beholden to Moscow for making such a triumvirate possible.

Despite some brief interruptions caused by disagreements regarding whether the negotiating parties represented the real military opposition in Syria or not, talks in Astana and between Russia and Jordan have resulted in an agreement on the creation of several de-escalation zones in Syria. The agreement proposes the establishment of such zones in Idlib, the Turkmen mountains, parts of the Homs governorate, and areas on the outskirts of Damascus, including Ghouta and in Daraa in the south. This has certainly been in line with the Turkish policy of establishing security/buffer zones in Syria to prevent the flow of refugees and to protect the Turkmen population without giving any advantageous position to the Kurds in Syria.

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55 Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on agreed steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict, 20 December 2016, Moscow, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran\\_-the-russian-federation-and-the-republic-of-turkey-on-agreed-steps-to-revitalize-the-political-process-to-end-the-syrian-conflict\\_-20-december-2016\\_-moscow.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran_-the-russian-federation-and-the-republic-of-turkey-on-agreed-steps-to-revitalize-the-political-process-to-end-the-syrian-conflict_-20-december-2016_-moscow.en.mfa) (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

## The Idlib Denouement?

Within this framework of de-escalation zones, Idlib remained as the last stronghold of the rebels including extremists such as *Al-Nusra*. A possible operation by Russian and Syrian regime forces has been seen forthcoming. Erdoğan attempted at the emphasis of Idlib in relation to Astana process, arguing in a telephone conversation with Putin in mid-July 2018 that an attack by the Syrian army in Idlib could destroy the Astana process.<sup>56</sup> The Russian standpoint on Idlib has been clear as usual: Foreign Minister Lavrov described militants in Idlib as “festering abscess that needed to be liquidated”; however, Lavrov also felt the necessity to state that “there was a political understanding between Turkey and Russia on the need to distinguish between the Syrian opposition and people he [Lavrov] described as terrorists in Idlib Province.”<sup>57</sup> Russian army occasionally continued to bomb rebel positions in Idlib, even right before the Teheran summit with Turkey and Iran to discuss the situation in that town.<sup>58</sup>

It did not get truly eased after the Teheran summit. Russian and Syrian warplanes bombed again following the failure to agree on a ceasefire, despite Erdoğan’s explicit efforts that has been rejected by Putin<sup>59</sup>, which has been unusually broadcasted live during the summit. Finally, an agreement was reached between Putin and Erdoğan in Russian Black Sea town Sochi to enforce a new demilitarized zone although how to distinguish ‘radically-minded’ rebels from other anti-regime groups were not clear as well as how much of the city of Idlib fell within that zone.<sup>60</sup> The concerns of a possible humanitarian disaster has been prevented as such. It has been interpreted as “a sign of Erdoğan’s influence over Putin”, while Putin has been rather cautious on the agreement to “resume transit traffic along the Aleppo-Latakia and Aleppo-Hama highways by the end of 2018, also at the initiative of the Turkish side.”<sup>61</sup>

In the ongoing of the process, although Putin has confirmed that Turkish side fulfilling its obligation<sup>62</sup>, Russia also continued to underline its sensitivity on *Al Nusra* militants and particularly their activities against the agreement.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, Turkish side was gloriously declaring the success of

56 “Turkey’s Erdoğan says Syrian government forces targeting Idlib could destroy accord”, *Reuters*, 14 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-russia/turkeys-erdogan-says-syrian-government-forces-targeting-idlib-could-destroy-accord-source-idUSKBN1K40VW> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

57 “Militants in Syria’s Idlib Province Must be Liquidated, Says Russia”, *Moscow Times*, 29 August 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/militants-in-syrias-idlib-province-must-be-liquidated-says-russia-62709> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

58 “Russia strikes Syria’s Idlib”, *Pravda*, 5 September 2018, <http://www.pravdareport.com/news/world/141536-russia-idlib/> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

59 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Russian and Syrian jets pound Idlib province after summit”, *Reuters*, 8 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-syria-idlib/russian-and-syrian-jets-pound-idlib-province-after-summit-idUSKCN1LO0EO> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

60 “Russia and Turkey Agree to Create Buffer Zone in Syria’s Idlib”, *Moscow Times*, 18 September 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-and-turkey-agree-to-create-buffer-zone-in-syrias-idlib-62912> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

61 “Russia and Turkey to set up Idlib buffer zone to protect civilians”, *The Guardian*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/17/russia-and-turkey-to-set-up-idlib-buffer-zone-to-protect-civilians> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

62 Mikhail Metzel, “Leaders at Syria Summit Stress Importance of Lasting Cease-Fire”, *Moscow Times*, 28 October 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/european-leaders-at-syria-summit-stress-importance-of-lasting-cess-fire-63322> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

63 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Koktebel, October 10, 2018”, [http://www.mid.ru/en/brifingi/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/3371172](http://www.mid.ru/en/brifingi/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/3371172) (Accessed on 28 March 2019); Vadim Savitskiy, “Russia Says Nusra Militants Want to Wreck Deal over Syria’s Idlib”, *Moscow Times*, 1 November 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-says-nusra-militants-want-to-wreck-deal-over-syrias-idlib-63382> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

demilitarization of Idlib in accordance with agreement in Sochi.<sup>64</sup> It can be said that Russia has not manifested an enthusiasm to fight since Putin said that the demilitarized zone was effective and no major military actions were planned in the region.<sup>65</sup>

A breaking incident occurred with an alleged chemical attack at the end of November 2018. While the deal on demilitarized zone was getting implemented despite exchanges of bullets and artillery, Russia accused rebels of launching a chemical attack on Aleppo on November 24. It then retaliated with air strikes on the rebels. It is worryingly claimed that in case of a Turkish failure to control Idlib's rebels, Russia can attack.<sup>66</sup> After all, by the time of concluding this article (30 November 2018), the elephant in the room remained: what about the extremist militants in Idlib? That is the crucial (and yet effectively unanswered) question in the negotiations on the control of that town Idlib, having its salient place in Russian and Turkish involvement in the Syrian civil war.

## Conclusion

Russia and Turkey have been through turbulent times in the Post-Cold War era, reflected also in remarkable redefinitions of their foreign policies. In current global crisis period, they have both been ruled by a mentality ambitious on great power status. The Syrian civil war as a gloomy result of so-called Arab Spring has been the theatre of these ambitions for both states in highly controversial ways.

This article aimed to analyze the turbulent Turkish-Russian relations in recent years, mostly shaped by the Syrian crisis. Since the crux of the Syrian matter has been the regime change, it must be reminded that these two countries have been on the opposite sides until recently. It is even argued that Russian military intervention was *also* caused by Turkish plans of military intervention. They have even come close to a direct fight over their disagreements, as plane incident manifested. However, a rapid rapprochement started as a result of a number of factors such as Turkish priority shift from the regime change to the prevention of Kurdish autonomy and the alienation from US also because of its alleged role in the failed coup attempt; domestic power reconfigurations in the country itself; and Russian enthusiasm to get Turkey on board that has been an ardent anti-regime power and to enjoy creating rifts in NATO so on and so forth. Developments have manifested an unusual and even unreasonable speed in the last couple of years.

From Turkish perspective, Syria is currently the top security issue for Turkish foreign policy, not only because of its direct consequences for Ankara's diplomatic and security relations with the West and Russia, but also due to its effects on Turkey's regional position as well as domestic developments. As was mentioned above, the Turkish government faces a long list of Syria-related priorities, including the emergence of PYD/YPG/PKK as an international actor, the existence of *Al-Qaeda* derivatives on Turkey's borders, the future of Sunni regions after the defeat of the ISIS, the increasing

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64 "İdlib'den çekildiler", *Yeni Şafak*, 9 October 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/tarih/idlibdencekildiler-3400876> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

65 Andrei Gryaznov, "Putin Says No Major Military Action Needed in Syria's Idlib", *Moscow Times*, 4 October 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-says-no-major-military-action-needed-in-syrias-idlib-63078> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

66 "The war that won't end, An alleged chemical attack by rebels threatens a truce in Syria", *The Economist*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/11/26/an-alleged-chemical-attack-by-rebels-threatens-a-truce-in-syria> (Accessed on 28 March 2019).

effectiveness and the legitimacy of Ba'ath regime in Syria, the situation of the refugees, and the future of the pro-Turkish opposition in Syria.

Among these priorities, the immediate concern for Turkey is the military, diplomatic, and political support that the United States and Russia had been providing to PYD/YPG/PKK especially in the last stages of the Syrian crisis. After the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, the Turkish authorities have been more vocal in their complaints about the US providing weapons and ammunitions to PKK and its affiliates in Syria. The authorities now assert that Russia better understands Ankara's sensitivities concerning this issue and has stopped giving military support to YPG. Within this context, as long as the Syrian conflict remains unresolved, Russia will play a decisive balancer role in the realization of Turkey's interests in Syria— despite Moscow's deceptive role as a political partner. Turkish decision-makers feel that they need Russian support to force the US to change its attitude toward YPG in Syria.

While the Kurdish issue remains an obsession for the Turkish establishment and as long as the US attitude toward PYD/YPG remains unchanged, Russia can be expected to play a strong and decisive role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. The flow of events and Ankara's diplomatic initiatives indicate that Turkish officials are trying to keep Iran and Russia on the Turkish side concerning Kurdish autonomy in Syria. This paradoxical attitude is the result of the three parties' long time geopolitical competition in the region, which drives their periodic conflicts as well as their cooperation. These current developments apparently have made Turkey an actor again on the Syrian battlefield; but in return, Russia is playing the Kurdish card with a much louder voice, thereby making Moscow a factor in Ankara's relations with the West. This complex web of relations results in an unbalanced, obscure and, at times, self-contradictory Turkish foreign policy.

One may consider that the activism of these two countries have been more process-oriented than result-oriented. This may seem valid even for Russian Federation that has hitherto reached its objective of keeping the Ba'ath regime in power. The process has been marked by the efforts by these two countries to prove that they are a key player in Syria imbroglio. It can be said that they both succeeded in this endeavor. However, they have both seen or been compelled to see the limits of their power and influence. Moreover, the recent cooperation between Russia and Turkey has been suffering from its own limitations anyway, at the very least on the salient point of the continuation of the Baath regime. It can be said that from Russian perspective, this cooperation has been an attempt to decrease the costs of its intervention. While from the Turkish perspective, it has been an effort to present itself again as a significant force in Syria, since its involvement in the American initiated policy of destroying the regime dramatically failed and even more than that, US has been declared to support PKK terrorism by Turkish authorities. Thus, both Russia and Turkey seem to reach their objectives in this sense of the process showing their salience. At the point they have grasped their limitations, they seem to prefer to focus on the process rather than an ultimate result.

All in all, one can only hope for a peaceful and democratic life for Syrians whom tremendously suffered *also* as a result of an imbroglio of all these global and regional powers' policies.