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## **UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS BETWEEN TURKEY AND RUSSIA: A NORMALIZATION OR ESCALATION?**

### **Abstract:**

Recently Turkey and Russia relations are undergoing a serious crisis since the downing of the Russian warplane by Turkish air forces for the violation of the Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015. As a matter of fact, relations between two countries were at the highest level after the end of the Cold War and there was a growing collaboration in terms of political and economic relations between two countries. For example, in 2010, both countries agreed to allow visa-free travel and reached an agreement for building Turkey's first nuclear power plant. However, because of the regional expansion of Russian power for the last decade, Turkey and Russia has started to hold opposing views on how to overcome regional problems. Especially after the Russian interventionist policies towards first Georgia and Ukraine and then the civil war in Syria, relations between the two countries have sharply deteriorated. Indeed, the ongoing crisis between the two countries is not just related with the civil war in Syria or the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane. Because there have been potential tensions between the two countries in many areas and factors since the end of the Cold War such as Azerbaijan and Armenia relations, Iran and nuclear crisis, transportation routes for hydrocarbon energy supplies, Chechnya in Russia and Kurdish issue in Turkey, geopolitical and military balances in the Black Sea region. The ongoing crisis has escalated in the aftermath the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane. This study argues that the normalization of Russia-Turkey relations in a short time is of utmost importance for the resolution of numerous conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the civil war in Syria and the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This study also seeks to answer the following questions; what should be done in order to deescalate the crisis? How this crisis may affect the future of war in Syria in particular and certain problems in the Middle East region in general?

### **Keywords:**

Russia, Turkey, Middle East, War in Syria

**JEL Classification:** F50, F51

## Introduction

Recently Turkey and Russia relations are undergoing a serious crisis since the downing of the Russian fighter jet by Turkish air forces for the violation of the Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015. As a matter of fact, relations between two countries were at the highest level after the end of the Cold War and there was a growing collaboration between two countries. However, because of the regional expansion of Russian power for the last decade, Turkey and Russia have started to hold opposing views on how to overcome regional problems. Especially after the Russian interventionist policies towards first Georgia and Ukraine and then the civil war in Syria, relations between the two countries have clearly deteriorated.

Indeed, the ongoing crisis between the two countries is not just related with the civil war in Syria or the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane. Because there have been potential tensions between the two countries in many areas and factors since the end of the Cold War such as policies towards Azerbaijan and Armenia relations, Iran and nuclear crisis, transportation routes for hydrocarbon energy supplies, Chechnya in Russia and Kurdish issue in Turkey, geopolitical and military balances in the Black Sea region and so on (Aktürk, 2013:7).

The ongoing crisis has escalated in the aftermath the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane. This study argues that the normalization of Russia-Turkey relations in a short time has utmost importance for the resolution of numerous conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the civil war in Syria and the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This study also seeks to answer the following questions; what should be done in order to deescalate the crisis? How this crisis may affect the future of war in Syria in particular and certain problems in the Middle East region in general?

Despite locating in the same geography, during the Cold War, Turkey and Soviet Union were members of the opposite blocs. However, both countries found many ways to keep dialogue channels open (Özdal, et al., 2013:8). Analyzing the historical trajectory of Turkey's ties with Russia shows that bilateral economic ties have been at the heart of Turkey-Soviet relations since the establishment of modern Turkey. That is why both countries have succeeded in developing a very constructive relationship across a variety of policy areas. Mutual economic interests in the post-Cold War era have brought Turkey and Russia into multi-level cooperation with each other (Özdal, et al., 2013:9). Additionally, the major structural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War have opened up new possibilities for Turkey and Russia to build up their bilateral relations (Alaranta, 2015:3).

Though they were rivals throughout the Cold War period, both countries have learned to coexist and advance common interests. To be sure, there have been occasional frictions in the 1990s and beyond (Bechev, 2015). For example, just after the dissolution of the Eastern Block, Turkey was eager to support the newly independent states mostly called as Turkic states in Central Asia adopt free market economies and liberal democracy. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent systemic transformation in general and regional developments in particular created

new challenges, as well as opportunities, for the enhancement of cooperation between two countries.

According to Ziya Onis and Suhnaz Yilmaz after the Cold War era we can identify two recognizable phases in Turkey and Russia relations (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2016:6). The first step was symbolized by significant cooperation in the economic relations because during the 1990s trade between Turkey and Russia expanded significantly. Especially in the context of the early 1990s a significant degree of complementarity existed between the economies of Turkey and the Russia by far the most important state emerging in the post-Soviet area. (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2016:6).

Second phase was characterized by significant elements of conflict in the midst of growing economic and political cooperation. A major cause of the conflict originated in Turkey's desire to play a leadership role within Central Asia. Conflict between the two countries also stemmed from their mutual involvement in the perennial domestic ethnic or minority conflicts confronting the two states (Chechen insurgents in Russia, and PKK in Turkey), in a somewhat symmetrical fashion (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2016:7).

Under the Justice and Development Party rule (especially between 2002-2010) the development of political relations between Turkey and Russia lead to deepen the political dialogue between the two countries and expand the prospects of cooperation between them closely in various fields, and several regions including the Black Sea, Caucasus, Balkans and Central Asia (Arafat and Alnuaimy, 2001:127).

However, different approaches and policies towards regional crises has been clearly showed up and Turkey and Russia relations continue to face some challenges in relation to the major frozen conflicts especially in the post-Soviet geography. For example, during Russian military intervention towards Georgia on 8 August 2008, Turkey decided to keep a low profile. Turkish response to the Russian annexation of Crimea was also low key, even though the conflict in Ukraine is a concern for Turkey since any destabilization in Ukraine could mean more conflict in the Black Sea region. Despite these concerns, Turkey's initial response to the war in Ukraine was very brief and diplomatic (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2016:13).

## **Civil War in Syria and Downing of the Russian Plane**

However, when we compare Turkey's policy towards crisis in Georgia and Ukraine, it appears that controversies regarding the civil war in Syria will be more difficult to handle for both countries. At first Turkey is determined that there will be no political future in Syria with Bashar al-Assad, while Russia clearly support the Assad regime in Syria. Both countries had managed not to air their disagreement over the future of Syria publicly, but with Russia increasing its military presence in this country, it is becoming more and more difficult for both countries to cover their disagreements on Syria issue (Yanık, 2015:366-375). According to Lerna Yanık, although both countries have "agreed to disagree" the tension between Turkey and Russia has kept on increasing (Yanık, 2015:366-375).

Turkey has long been involved in the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime given the over 900 kilometers of its shared border with Syria, the support it has provided to opposition fighters against Assad and the almost 3 million Syrian refugees hosted by Turkey (studies.aljazeera.net).

There is no doubt that Moscow has been supporting the Assad regime against its opponents ever since opposition arose in Syria in 2011. But with the Assad regime losing ground to its opponents, Moscow significantly ramped up its support for Assad since late September 2015. Katz argues that Putin's moves in Syria may be aimed at ending Russia's isolation from the West resulting from their disagreements over Ukraine in addition to preserving the Assad regime (Katz, 2015:2-3).

Therefore, in 2015 Russia has embarked on a remarkable spate of diplomatic activity, triggered or reinforced mainly by two factors: first, the rise of the terrorist organization (ISIL) and the increasingly difficult situation of the regime on the ground; second, by the nuclear agreement reached between the international community and Iran. With the effects of these developments Russia dispatched military aircraft to Syria and became an active warring party. This is post-Soviet Russia's first military intervention beyond its neighborhood (Casula, 2015:6).

The Russian military intervention in the civil war in Syria began on 30 September 2015, just after the formal request by the Assad regime for military support against rebel and jihadist groups in Syria. After the Russian military intervention towards Syria, in October 2015, the political and military tension between Turkey and Russia reached a different level. Russia decided to increase its military build up in Syria and launched airstrikes against Islamic State targets. This increased Russian presence also coincided with Turkish airspace violations by Russia (Yanık, 2015:366-375).

On 24 November 2015, a Russian warplane was shot down by a Turkish Air Force. The incident triggered a confrontation between Russia and Turkey. Therefore, Turkey-Russia relations are undergoing a serious crisis since the downing of the Russian warplane by Turkey for the violation of the Turkish airspace. From the warplane incident onwards, both sides present arguments to justify their actions through reciprocal statements. The future and the overall course of the relations are thought mostly to depend on a statement of formal apology by Turkey to Russia. Russia particularly states that for the normalization of the relations Turkey has to make an apology, otherwise the sanctions that have been introduced on various sectors will continue increasingly (Özlük, 2015:3).

How should Turkey respond to the Russians' demand for apology? Turkey 'deliberately' intervened to halt the Russian fighter jet because it violated Turkey's airspace and sovereign territory without responding to recurrent warnings. Since the pilot did not respond to the calls to alter its course, Turkish intervention took place regardless of the warplane's country of origin. Indeed, the Turkish General Staff's first official statement indicated that "a warplane of unknown origin has been subjected to intervention along with the rules of engagement on the grounds that it violated the Turkish airspace". But the real issue at hand is not the origin and the purpose of the

warplane. It is a military aircraft. As confirmed on different channels, Turkey warned the fighter jet multiple times and did not receive a response. (Özlük, 2015:6).

Turkey's action against the Russian warplane was not based on its unilateral rules of engagement, but rather on the violation of its sovereign territory, which is a self-evident international law principle. The Russian warplane was noticed as required (ten times according to the official statement) and was shot down when no response was given. Records of the warning and radar images showing the violation were shared with the whole world (Özlük, 2015:6).

## Conclusion

The normalization of Russia-Turkey relations in a short time is of utmost importance for the resolution of numerous conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the civil war in Syria and the fight against ISIS. Though, Turkey's efforts for normalization are countered with statements by Russia. Russia also launched retaliatory sanctions and insisted on a formal apology as a condition for the contact between the two Heads of State. Furthermore, Russia worsens the overall course of the relations by claiming that Turkey initiates oil trade with ISIS, thereby contributing to the finances of the terrorist organization (Özlük, 2015:10).

The most likely way for the resolution of the conflict is through the communication between the two countries on lower levels rather than making statements that involve the public. Reciprocal sanctions, retaliation and high level contacts are not useful to resolve the current tension. Yet, Russia's insistence on apology for a normalization in the relations and Turkey's certain refusal to apologize reduce the chances to achieve that in the short term (Özlük, 2015:10).

The question is, amidst growing tension and continued divergence over Syria, will it continue to be that way? In other words, can Russia and Turkey continue to "keep calm" and continue to trade and invest? The answer depends on whether or not both countries will be able to find a middle ground where they will be able to converge their diverging interests in Syria (Yanık, 2015:375).

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