



# EMERGING PROBLEMS IN THE ANKARA-MOSCOW AXIS: THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND NATO MISSILE DEFENCE

Ankara-Moskova Ekseninde Yeni Sorun Alanları: Suriye Krizi ve NATO Füze Kalkanı

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It should be indicated that both Ankara and Moscow have actually striven to define their bilateral relations independently from the Syrian issue. For instance, during his visit to Moscow in January 2012, Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu tried to find a common ground with the Russian officials regarding the Syrian crisis.

## ÖZET

2000'li yıllar boyunca Türkiye ve Rusya arasında siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel alanda hızla gelişen ilişkiler iki ülke arasında bir stratejik ortaklık ilişkisinin doğduğuna yönelik algıyı güçlendirmiştir. Ne var ki özellikle 2010 yılıyla birlikte iki ülke arasında Suriye iç savaşı ve NATO füze kalkanı meselesine bağlı anlaşmazlıklar öne çıkmaya başlamış ve bu bağlamda Türkiye-Rusya ilişkilerini bir stratejik ortaklık olarak tanımlamak giderek daha zor hale gelmiştir. Bu makale, halen uluslararası ilişkiler gündeminde en ön sırada yer alan bu iki sorunun Ankara ve Moskova arasındaki ilişkiler üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmeyi ve iki ülkenin bu sorunlarla ilgili çıkar ve tehdit algulamalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

## ABSTRACT

The rapid improvement of political, economic and cultural relations between Turkey and Russia during the 2000s reinforced the image that the two countries have been developing a strategic partnership with each other. However, in the light of the widening discord between Ankara and Moscow regarding the Syrian civil war and NATO missile defense issue since 2010, it has become increasingly difficult to define the Turkish-Russian relations as a strategic partnership. This article aims to explore the influence of these two current developments on the future of the Turkish-Russian relations and analyze the two countries' respective interest and threat perceptions with regard to the Syrian crisis and NATO missile defense issue.

**Keywords:** Turkish foreign policy, Turkish-Russian relations, Syrian civil war, NATO missile defense

## Introduction

Following the election of Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation in 2000 and the victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Turkish general elections of 2002, the political, economic and cultural relations between Ankara and Moscow developed continuously – giving rise to comments that a strategic partnership has been emerging between the two countries. Although this can be regarded as a very bold claim, it is also true that the positive course of relations between Turkey and Russia throughout the 2000s gradually changed the “geopolitical rivalry” notion of the previous decade which portrayed the two countries as chief competitors for political and economic influence in the former Soviet space. In this regard, it is important to note that since early 2000s both Ankara and Moscow have tended to define their relationship with each other within the framework of a “multidimensional strengthened partnership” vision.

Although economic interests and close cooperation in the sphere of energy seem to be the driving force behind the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, it should be emphasized that the relations between Ankara and Moscow have also

been significantly influenced by the changes taking place in the regional and international context. An important regional factor which has contributed to the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia in this regard has been the two countries' search for a common ground in their policies towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia. At the international level, however, their respective relations with the US and EU could be regarded as the most significant factor that shaped the strategic relations between Ankara and Moscow. The remarkable improvement of Turkish-Russian relations in the face of Turkey's stalled EU membership process in the second half of 2000s in particular compelled many scholars to indicate the rise of “soft Euro-Asianism” in Turkish foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the emergence of such a heated debate about new alternatives in Turkish foreign policy, it should be indicated that the limits of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement have become increasingly visible in the last few years due to the two countries' widening discord regarding the popular uprisings sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa – most notably in Syria. Another problem which currently overshadows the positive atmosphere in Turkish-Russian

relations is the Western missile defense which has been included within the framework of NATO since 2010. It is interesting to note that Turkey's position has become increasingly closer to the positions of the US and EU rather than Russia in both of these issues which caused a significant rift between Moscow and the Western capitals.

### **General Framework of Turkish-Russian Relations in the 2000s**

It should be noted that ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union; mutual economic interests have shaped the general course of Turkish-Russian relations. Apart from the shuttle trade which has been the driving force of the bilateral economic relations between the two countries especially until the period of 1997-98, Turkish construction companies have also undertaken significant projects totaling at least 30 billion dollars in various Russian cities. It is important to view in this regard that even in the first half of the 1990s when Ankara and Moscow's geopolitical competition over South Caucasus and Central Asia seemed most acute, their bilateral trade figures continued to grow very remarkably. This trend was maintained in the 2000s and the annual trade volume between Turkey and Russia surpassed 33 billion dollars by the end of 2012.<sup>2</sup> This currently makes Russia the second most important trading partner of Turkey after Germany. At the same time, officials of the two countries frequently express their interest in increasing this figure up to 100 billion dollars by 2015. In tourism, which is another important field of economic cooperation, on the other hand, more than three and a half million Russian citizens visited Turkey only in 2012.<sup>3</sup> The city of Antalya in particular seems to have become one of the most popular holiday destinations for Russian tourists in this regard.

Energy is currently the most important item in Turkish-Russian economic relations. In 2012, 58 percent of the natural gas and 11 percent of the crude oil that is consumed in the Turkish market came from Russia.<sup>4</sup> Especially after the inauguration of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline in 2005, the two countries' cooperation in the field of energy has become even more salient. In 2009, for example, Russia received green light from Ankara for conducting geological research for its South Stream natural gas pipeline in the Turkish territorial waters in the Black Sea, while Turkey achieved to persuade Moscow to jointly build a new oil pipeline between Samsun and Ceyhan. Regarding nuclear energy, on the other hand, one of the shareholders of the Russian state company Rosatom won the tender in 2010 for constructing Turkey's first ever nuclear plant in Akkuyu. This grand project, which is expected to attract an investment of 20 billion dollars and become operational in 2019, provided a new boost to the

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already powerful energy relationship between Turkey and Russia.

The enhanced Turkish-Russian cooperation in the field of energy, trade and tourism also seems to have had repercussions on the strategic relations between Ankara and Moscow in the former Soviet space. Most importantly, since early 2000s, a political dialogue has been developing between the two countries with regard to the political problems in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Black Sea regions. For example, Turkish and Russian foreign ministers signed a comprehensive regional cooperation document as early as 2001.<sup>5</sup> The two countries also sought to improve their dialogue in the Black Sea region through making use of multilateral platforms including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and Black Sea Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR). Ankara's proposal for the establishment of a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 can also be regarded as an initiative that highlighted the importance of the continuation of the Turkish-Russian political dialogue for the solution of regional issues.<sup>6</sup> Such initiatives have also been an important indication of the two countries' determination to tackle the regional matters in their neighborhood in consultation with each other, rather than outside powers like the US and EU.

The increased frequency of high-level visits can also be regarded as a sign of the strengthened political dialogue between Ankara and Moscow. In December 2004, Putin became the first Russian president to officially visit Turkey in thirty two years and Turkish-Russian relations were officially elevated to the level of "multidimensional strengthened partnership."<sup>7</sup> In early 2010, during Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Moscow, the two countries decided to carry their partnership to an upper level by agreeing to establish a high-level cooperation council that would meet twice a year with the participation of the presidents and/or prime ministers. These so-called "joint cabinet meetings" very clearly indicate the degree of the ongoing diplomatic dialogue between Ankara and Moscow.

There have also been important developments in the cultural sphere. For instance, 2007 was declared as the Rus-



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sia Culture Year in Turkey, while 2008 was celebrated as the Turkey Culture Year in Russia. More importantly, in 2010, the two countries decided to implement visa-free travel for each other's citizens for stays of up to thirty days. This was a very remarkable development that was almost impossible to imagine only a few years before, as also stated by Vladimir Ivanovsky, the Russian ambassador to Turkey.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a number of agreements signed recently in the field of arts, science, education and sports is expected to contribute to the cultural relations between Turkey and Russia in the upcoming years.

### **The Syrian Crisis**

At a time when the Turkish-Russian relations have been improving in such a remarkable pace, both Ankara and Moscow were caught quite unprepared by the popular uprisings that forced the rulers of Tunisia and Egypt from power in the first few months of 2011. It is viewed in this regard that the Turkish government acted more rapidly and championed the democratic developments in these two countries, while Moscow adapted a lower profile "wait-and-see" policy

towards the events. In February, when the protests spread to Libya, however, both governments were very critical about a possible Western humanitarian intervention against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>9</sup> Still, Russia chose to abstain in the UN Security Council voting in March for the resolution that authorized the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya with the purpose of protecting the civilians.

The drastic change in Russia's perception of the Arab uprisings seems to have occurred with the launch of a military operation against Libya by the international coalition, which used the UN resolution as the pretext of this action. While Ankara reluctantly decided to lend its support to the Western-led military operation, the conduct of which was later transferred to NATO, Putin harshly criticized the operation from the very first moment and even likened the UN resolution to "a medieval call for crusade".<sup>10</sup> It should be noted, however, that President Medvedev criticized Putin's statement and stated that the developments in Libya should not trigger a clash of civilizations between the West and Russia.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Russia was gradually excluded from the lucrative oil market in Libya, Medvedev's moderate discourse gradually lost ground against Putin's tougher stance.

The deep divide between Moscow and the West in the course of the Arab uprisings, however, became visible only after the spread of the protests to Syria in April 2011. The Syrian crisis has also influenced the course of Turkish-Russian relations in a much more direct manner. Despite the rapid improvement of the political and economic relations between Turkey and Syria in the 2000s, Ankara became increasingly uncomfortable about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's reluctance to initiate political and social reforms as well as his ruthless military response against the demonstrators. Eventually, after months of futile mediation efforts, the Turkish government started to publicly condemn the al-Assad regime and provide support for the Syrian opposition by mid-2011. This radical change in Ankara's policy towards Syria also put Turkish-Russian relations to test due to the continuation of Moscow's diplomatic support for the al-Assad government.<sup>12</sup> Thus, despite the increasingly vocal Turkish warnings about al-Assad regime's severe human rights violations, Moscow continued to view the developments in Syria mainly as a "foreign-supported uprising" directed against a legitimate government and vetoed three UN resolutions which called for international sanctions against Damascus.

**The most serious crisis between Turkey and Russia regarding the Syrian crisis, however, took place on 10 October 2012, when the Turkish fighter jets forced a Syrian passenger plane that was travelling from Moscow to Damascus to land in Ankara.**

In view of the large-scale demonstrations which took place against Putin and Medvedev in various Russian cities including Moscow and St. Petersburg following the allegations of fraud in the State Duma elections of December 2011, it is not hard to understand why the Russian government has preferred to define the Arab uprisings as the "domestic issue" of these countries.<sup>13</sup> Yet, there are some factors which make the case of Syria more significant for Moscow. First of all, Syria has long been a strategic partner of Russia in the Middle East due to the close military relations between the two countries since the Soviet times. It should be noted in this regard that there is a Russian naval base in the

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Syrian city of Tartus which has been operational since 1971. According to some scholars, for example, Moscow provided support for the al-Assad forces in recapturing the city of al-Qusayr in May 2013 due to this city's strategic location on the route leading to the Russian naval base.<sup>14</sup> Russia is also claimed to have sold three to four billion dollars of military equipment to Syria in the 2005-2010 period.<sup>15</sup> In line with the provisions of an agreement signed between Russia and Syria in 2010, for example, Moscow started to dispatch parts of S-300 long-range surface-to-air missile systems to the al-Assad regime amidst the protests of the international community.

It should be indicated that both Ankara and Moscow have actually striven to define their bilateral relations independently from the Syrian issue. For instance, during his visit to Moscow in January 2012, Turkish foreign minister Davutoğlu tried to find a common ground with the Russian officials regarding the Syrian crisis.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Erdoğan and Putin met in July to discuss Turkish-Russian relations as well as the developments in Syria.<sup>17</sup> The fact that this meeting in Moscow took place shortly after the crisis that erupted due to Syria's shooting down of a Turkish F-4 reconnaissance jet is another sign of the close Turkish-Russian political dialogue despite the negative repercussions of the Syrian issue.

At the same time, however, maintaining the Turkish-Russian rapprochement under the shadow of the Syrian crisis has not been an easy task to accomplish. For instance, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have frequently condemned Moscow's support for the al-Assad government in various international platforms.<sup>18</sup> The Russian officials, on the other hand, expressed their deep concerns about Ankara's decision to deploy NATO Patriot missiles in the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2012.<sup>19</sup> The governments of the two countries also failed to reach a consensus regarding the real perpetrators of the bombed attacks of May 2013 in the Turkish town of Reyhanlı where more than fifty people were killed. While Ankara directly accused the al-Assad government for plotting the attacks, Moscow put the blame on the shoulders of the Syrian opposition groups.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Turkish and Russian perspectives regarding the Ghouta incident of August 2013, where hundreds of Syrian citizens were killed as a result of a chemical attack also seemed significantly different. Claiming that the attack was planned by the forces of al-Assad, the Turkish government declared its readiness to join any international military coalition against Syria.<sup>21</sup> Moscow, on the other hand, strongly opposed such a military intervention due to lack of sufficient evidence suggesting that the attack was carried out by the Syrian government.<sup>22</sup> In his article published in an American newspaper, Putin even warned the international community that a military action against al-Assad would "unleash a new

wave of terrorism" and strengthen the hand of extremist groups like the al-Nusra front.<sup>23</sup> Although Ankara also had serious concerns about the activities of al-Nusra near the Turkish-Syrian border, it still pushed for a military operation. Russian and US foreign ministers, however, later reached an agreement on the initiation of a new process where Damascus would turn its chemical weapons over to international controls. This development showed once again that regarding the Syrian crisis, Turkish-Russian relations were closely linked with the developments taking place in the Washington-Moscow axis. It should also be noted, in this regard, that the joint Russian-US initiative for the convening of a new Syrian peace conference in Geneva is claimed to have been viewed by Turkey as another futile attempt that would only help al-Assad buy extra time.<sup>24</sup>

The most serious crisis between Turkey and Russia regarding the Syrian crisis, however, took place on 10 October 2012, when the Turkish fighter jets forced a Syrian passenger plane that was travelling from Moscow to Damascus to land in Ankara. The Turkish authorities claimed that the plane was carrying Russian-made munitions destined for the armed forces of the al-Assad regime.<sup>25</sup> Moscow, however, declared that the cargo of the plane did not violate international law and harshly criticized the Turkish officials' allegedly unfriendly manner towards the Russian citizens in the plane.<sup>26</sup> The tension could only be averted after a few days by the statements of the foreign ministers of the two countries who emphasized that the friendly relations between Turkey and Russia should not become a hostage to the disagreements regarding the Syrian crisis.<sup>27</sup>

Putin's visit to Turkey which was initially planned to take place in October, but was later postponed to December can also be viewed within the framework of Turkish and Russian officials' desire to maintain the political dialogue. Although some comments in the Russian press implied that Putin postponed his visit as a reaction to the passenger plane crisis, it was revealed that the decision was actually taken a week before the incident during Erdoğan and Putin's telephone conversation.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, the new date of the visit was decided and announced in a remarkably quick manner. Eventually, Russian ambassador Ivanovsky said that the passenger plane crisis should be left behind, although he also confessed that the plane was actually carrying radar spare parts to Syria.<sup>29</sup>

Putin finally came to Turkey on 3 December 2012 and signed new agreements with the Turkish government in various spheres including economy, finance, security, trade and cultural cooperation. The warm atmosphere during the visit once again showed that Ankara and Moscow were interested in improving bilateral relations despite their differences regarding the Syrian issue. Another indication of this interest

was Ankara's unilateral decision in May 2012 to increase the visa-free visits of Russian citizens from 30 days to 60 days. The two governments' dedication to maintain their strategic dialogue is also expected to be highlighted in the fourth Turkish-Russian high-level cooperation council meeting which is to be held in Moscow in November 2013.

### **NATO Missile Defense Issue**

Although not as salient as the Syrian crisis, a second issue which has recently been causing friction between Ankara and Moscow is related with the NATO missile defense. Since early 2000s, Moscow has persistently criticized the missile defense project, which was initially proposed by the US within the framework of its own national defense strategy, on the grounds that it was designed against Russia, rather than the so-called rogue states like Iran or North Korea. In this regard, it has persistently opposed the US plans to deploy the elements of the missile defense system in the territories of the East European countries like Poland and the Czech Republic. In 2007, Putin even proposed the installation of the system in Turkey and Iraq, which he thought made more sense in view of these countries' geographical proximity to Iran. He also stated that instead of developing a separate missile defense project, Russia and the West could jointly use the Gebele radar in Azerbaijan for countering the threats from other countries.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the Russian reservations and counter-proposals, it was decided in the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010 that the missile defense system's early warning radar would be stationed in the town of Kürecik in Eastern Turkey, while the interceptors were to be stationed in Romania. Although Moscow was also convinced in the Lisbon Summit to cooperate with NATO on this issue, subsequent talks between the parties failed to solve the problem mainly because NATO refused to grant Moscow legal guarantees that the missile defense system would not be deployed against Russia's own strategic forces. Eventually, as a reaction, Moscow opened its own early warning radar in November 2011 in the city of Kaliningrad. In May 2012, the Russian defense minister Anatoly Serdyukov even warned that Moscow could consider a pre-emptive strike to physically destroy the elements of the NATO missile defense system in Eastern Europe. This also meant that the early warning radar in Kürecik which finally came into operation in January 2012 could become a main target of the Russian missiles.<sup>31</sup> Despite all warnings, however, NATO officials made it clear that the alliance would continue developing and deploying its missile defense capacity, regardless of the status of its cooperation with Moscow on this issue.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, however, it should be indicated that the Russian government carefully refrained from directly accus-

ing Turkey and diverted its criticism towards NATO and the US regarding the missile defense issue. Moreover, it can be claimed that Ankara's policies regarding the missile defense system have not been completely harmonious with the policies of NATO as also indicated by Turkey's latest decision to acquire its first long-range anti-missile system from China instead of the Western countries. Although the Russian S-300 system was also among the losers of the same tender, the current divide between Turkey and NATO regarding this issue is also closely watched by Moscow due to its potential repercussions on Russia's own missile defense conflict with NATO.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As also signified by the disagreements regarding the Syrian crisis and NATO missile defense issue, there are still very important problems that need to be resolved before the Turkish-Russian relations can be defined as a strategic partnership. The major obstacle before the emergence of a strategic partnership mentality between Ankara and Moscow in this regard seems to be closely related with the fact that their bilateral relations are still largely determined by economic interests –and particularly their cooperation in the field of energy. However, a strategic partnership between any two countries can only develop if they are also able to reconcile their regional political interests. Although such a reconciliation between Turkey and Russia seems to have been achieved to a certain extent in the Caucasus and Central Asia, it should be noted that potential threats like the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia or the frozen problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia may still trigger a regional crisis in the Turkish-Russian relations.

Regarding the Syrian crisis and NATO missile defense issue, on the other hand, the interest and threat perceptions of the two countries are currently almost irreconcilable. The presence of institutional mechanisms like the high-level cooperation council is certainly very important in terms of advancing the political dialogue between Ankara and Moscow on these two problems. Yet, it should be emphasized that such mechanisms alone can hardly make a substantial impact on the long-term relations between the two countries as also indicated by Turkey's worsening relations with Syria and Iraq despite the establishment of similar cooperation councils.

It should also be noted that Ankara's official position regarding the Syrian crisis and NATO missile defense have lately become remarkably closer to the position of the Western capitals despite the Turkish leaders' populist discourse which calls for upgrading Turkey's relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Although it is true that the Turkish-Russian relations may receive a new boost

due to the ongoing problems in Turkey's EU membership process, it should also be remembered that relations with Russia are regarded as only one of the dimensions of the so-called "multidimensional foreign policy" vision of the current Turkish government. In this regard, despite all the setbacks in Ankara's relations with the EU in the last decade,

Turkey's strategic dialogue with the US and NATO has recently been back on the rise mainly due to the Syrian crisis. This makes it harder to view Russia as a strategic partner of Turkey despite the rapid improvement of relations between the two countries in the 2000s.



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