

Russia-Turkey Relations and the Kremlin's "Kurdish Card"

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Turkey involved itself in Syria without having properly thought-through all eventualities, and one of these eventualities was Russian military intervention, in support of the Syrian people, which, as we know, materialised in September 2015.

As a result of Moscow having deployed its military forces to Syria, to assist with the liberation of the country from Wahhabist terrorists, this inevitably meant that Russia and Turkey were going to come into conflict with each other because the Turks have played a crucial role in supporting the terrorist groups operating on Syrian soil, including giving support to ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

And it was Turkey who threw the first punch in that face-off between Moscow and Ankara when, in November 2015, it shot down a Russian SU-24 aircraft, close to the Syrian-Turkish border, which was returning to base following a bombing mission against terrorists. However, Turkey punched above its weight and would soon pay dearly for this.

Firstly, Russia imposed biting sanctions on the Turkish economy. But, even more alarming for Ankara, was the Kremlin's threat, in its private communication with the Turkish Government, to play its Kurdish card against the Turkish state. Turkey's Achilles heel is the Kurds – those in Turkey, Syria and Iraq – and Moscow has historically maintained close ties with various Kurdish groups, especially the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK.

For good measure, at the end of 2015, the Russians began supplying the PKK with even more weapons and, crucially, intelligence on the movements of Turkish army and gendarmerie convoys in south-eastern Turkey.

As a result of a spike in casualties amongst Turkish forces at the hands of the PKK from the end of 2015 to early 2016, on account of Russian actions, Ankara realised that it was at the mercy of Russia and the Kremlin was prepared to go all the way in igniting a war that would pit Turkey against the PKK, the Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds and which could result in Ankara losing swathes of its territory.

And there was no way for Turkey to strike back at Russia because the card which the Turks had played against the Russians during the 1990s, the Chechen one, was no longer an option, given that the Kremlin has long pacified not just Chechnya but Dagestan and Ingushetia, too.

So that is why Recep Tayyip Erdogan travelled to St Petersburg, in early 2016, and profusely apologised to Vladimir Putin for the shooting down of the Russian military aircraft months before. And ever since then, Russia has used the threat of playing its Kurdish card to force Turkey to scale down its support to the terrorists in Syria, limit its neo-Ottoman ambitions in the region and support Russian peace initiatives aimed at gradually ending the conflict in Syria.

Now, of course, Turkey still harbours ambitions for the north of Syria – namely, partition – and is still supporting the terrorists in Idlib but this is incomparable to Turkish goals and actions in Syria from 2012 to 2015. That is something for the Syrian people to rejoice over. So yes – the Turks still illegally maintain their forces in northern Syria but the Turkish position in the region is gradually weakening on account of Russia’s leverage over Turkey, which Ankara is unable to resist because of the Kremlin’s threat to play its Kurdish card, which would be catastrophic for the Turkish state, should the Russians play it.

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