

Why Did Turkey Shoot Down That Russian Plane?

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It was certainly not because the SU-24 posed any threat. The plane is old and slow, and the Russians were careful not to arm it with anti-aircraft missiles. It was not because the Turks are quick on the trigger. Three years ago Turkish President Recep Tayyip [Erdoğan said](#), "A short-term violation of airspace can never be a pretext for an attack." And there are [some doubts](#) about whether the Russian plane ever crossed into Turkey's airspace.

Indeed, the whole Nov. 24 incident looks increasingly suspicious, and one doesn't have to be a paranoid Russian to think the takedown might have been an ambush. As Lt. Gen. Tom McInerney (ret), former U.S. Air Force chief of staff commented, "This airplane was not making any maneuvers to attack the [Turkish] territory," the Turkish action was "overly aggressive," and the incident "had to be preplanned."

It certainly puzzled the [Israeli military](#), not known for taking a casual approach to military intrusions. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon told the press Nov. 29 that a Russian warplane had violated the Israeli border over the Golan Heights. "Russian planes do not intend to attack us, which is why we must not automatically react and shoot them down when an error occurs."

So why was the plane downed? Because, for the first time in four years, some major players are tentatively inching toward a settlement of the catastrophic Syrian civil war, and powerful forces are maneuvering to torpedo that process. If the Russians had not kept their [cool](#), several nuclear-armed powers could well have found themselves in a scary faceoff, and any thoughts of ending the war would have gone a glimmering.

There are multiple actors on the Syrian stage and a bewildering number of crosscurrents and competing agendas that, paradoxically, make it both easier and harder to find common ground. Easier, because there is no unified position among the antagonists; harder, because trying to herd heavily armed cats is a tricky business.

A short score card on the players:

The Russians and the Iranians are supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and fighting a host of extremist organizations ranging from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State (IS). But each country has a different view of what a post civil war Syria might look like. The Russians want a centralized and secular state with a big army. The Iranians don't think much of "secular," and they favor [militias](#), not armies.



Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with President Barack Obama during a G20 summit in Pittsburgh,

Sept, 25, 2009. (Pete Souza)

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and most the other Gulf monarchies are trying to overthrow the Assad regime, and are the major supporters of the groups Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah are fighting. But while Turkey and Qatar want to replace Assad with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia might just hate the Brotherhood more than it does Assad. And while the monarchies are not overly concerned with the Kurds, Turkey is [bombing](#) them, and they are a major reason why Ankara is so deeply enmeshed in Syria.

The U.S., France and Great Britain are also trying to overthrow Assad, but are currently focused on fighting the IS using the Kurds as their major allies—specifically the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party, an offshoot of the Kurdish Workers Party that the U.S. officially designates as “terrorist.” These are the same Kurds that the Turks are bombing and who have a friendly alliance with the Russians. Indeed, Turkey may discover that one of the price tags for shooting down that SU-24 is the sudden appearance of new Russian weapons for the Kurds, some of which will be aimed at the Turks.

The Syrian war requires a certain suspension of rational thought.

For instance, the Americans are unhappy with the Russians for bombing the anti-Assad Conquest Army, a force dominated by the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria. That would be the same al-Qaeda that brought down the World Trade towers and that the U.S. is currently bombing in Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan.

Suspension of rational thought is not limited to Syria.

A number of Arab countries initially joined the U.S. air war against the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, because both organizations are pledged to overthrow the Gulf monarchies. But Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have now [dropped out](#) to concentrate their air power on bombing the Houthis in Yemen.

The Houthis, however, are by far the most effective force fighting the IS and al-Qaeda in Yemen. Both extremist organizations have made major gains in the last few weeks because the Houthis are too busy defending themselves to take them on.

In spite of all this political derangement, however, there are several developments that are pushing the sides toward some kind of peaceful settlement that doesn't involve regime change in Syria. That is exactly what the Turks and the Gulf monarchs are worried about, and a major reason why Ankara shot down that Russian plane.

The first of these developments has been building throughout the summer: a growing flood of Syrians fleeing the war. There are already almost two million in Turkey, and over a million in Jordan and Lebanon, and as many as 900,000 in Europe. Out of 23 million Syrians, some 11 million have been displaced by the war, and the Europeans are worried that many of those 11 million people will end up camping out on the banks of the Seine and the Rhine. If the war continues into next year, that is a pretty accurate assessment.

Hence, the Europeans have quietly [shelved](#) their demand that Assad resign as a prerequisite for a ceasefire and are leaning on the [Americans](#) to follow suit. The issue is hardly resolved, but there seems to be general agreement that Assad will at least be part of a transition government. At this point, the Russians and Iranians are insisting on an [election](#) in which Assad would be a candidate because both are wary of anything that looks like “regime

change.” The role Assad might play will be a sticking point, but probably not an insurmountable one.



(Wikiwand)

Turkey and Saudi Arabia are adamant that Assad must go, but neither of them is in the [driver's seat](#) these days. While NATO supported Turkey in the Russian plane incident, according to some of the Turkish press many of its leading officials consider Erdoğan a [loose cannon](#). And Saudi Arabia—whose economy has been hard hit by the worldwide fall in oil prices—is preoccupied by its Yemen war that is turning into a very expensive quagmire.

The second development is the Russian intervention, which appears to have [changed things](#) on the ground, at least in the north, where Assad's forces were being hard pressed by the Conquest Army. New weapons and airpower have dented a rebel offensive and resulted in some gains in the government's battle for Syria's largest city, Aleppo.

Russian bombing also took a heavy toll on the [Turkmen](#) insurgents in the Bayirbucak region, the border area that Turkey has used to [infiltrate arms](#), supplies and insurgents into Syria.

The appearance of the Russians essentially killed Turkey's efforts to create a “no fly zone” on its border with Syria, a proposal that the U.S. has never been [enthusiastic](#) about. Washington's major allies, the Kurds, are strongly opposed to a no fly zone because they see it as part of Ankara's efforts to keep the Kurds from forming an autonomous region in Syria.

The Bayirbucak area and the city of Jarabulus are also the exit point for Turkey's lucrative oil smuggling operation, apparently overseen by Erdoğan's son, Bilal. The Russians have embarrassed the Turks by publishing [satellite photos](#) showing miles of tanker trucks picking up oil from IS-controlled wells and shipping it through Turkey's southern border with Syria.

“The oil controlled by the Islamic State militants enters Turkish territory on an industrial scale,” Russian President Vladimir Putin [said Nov. 30](#). “We have every reason to believe that the decision to down our plane was guided by a desire to insure the security of this oil's delivery routes to ports where they are shipped in tankers.”

Erdoğan did not get quite the response he wanted from NATO following the shooting down of the SU-24. While the military alliance backed Turkey's defense of its “sovereignty,” NATO then called for a peaceful resolution and de-escalation of the whole matter.

At a time when Europe needs a solution to the refugee crisis, and wants to focus its firepower on the organization that killed 130 people in Paris, NATO cannot be happy that the Turks are dragging them into a confrontation with the Russians, and making the whole situation a lot more dangerous than it was before the Nov. 24 incident.

The Russians have now deployed their more modern SU-34 bombers and armed them with [air-to-air missiles](#). The bombers will now also be escorted by SU-35 fighters. The Russians have also fielded S-300 and S-400 [anti-aircraft systems](#), the latter with a range of 250 miles. The Russians say they are not looking for trouble, but they are loaded for bear should it happen. Would a dustup between Turkish and Russian planes bring NATO—and four nuclear armed nations—into a confrontation? That possibility ought to keep people up

at night.

Some time around the New Year, the countries involved in the Syrian civil war will come together in Geneva. A number of those will do their level best to derail the talks, but one hopes there are enough sane—and desperate—parties on hand to map out a political solution.

It won't be easy, and who gets to sit at the table has yet to be decided. The Turks will object to the Kurds, the Russians, Iranians and Kurds will object to the Conquest Army, and the Saudis will object to Assad. In the end it could all come apart. It is not hard to torpedo a peace plan in the Middle East.

But if the problems are great, failure will be catastrophic, and that may be the glue that keeps the parties together long enough to hammer out a ceasefire, an arms embargo, a new constitution, and internationally supervised elections.

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