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The Confrontation between Turkey and Russia: Lessons for Israel

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Israel is not part of the Middle East upheaval and plays almost no active role in it. Whether out of choice or dictated by circumstances, Israeli policy has thus far favored sitting on the fence and observing from the side while developments unfold. Regardless of questions regarding the fundamental wisdom of this policy, current events oblige Israel to internalize and understand the emerging dangers and opportunities in its surroundings. Indeed, in a region that must commonly adapt to new patterns – reflecting frequent changes in the delicate balance among the many actors involved – a new chapter in the complex plot is underway, with the first military confrontation between Turkey and Russia. Turkey's downing of the Russian plane has both highlighted and sharpened contradictions and truths on the bilateral and international levels.

Above all, this is a clash between two countries whose relations are based on an historic rivalry that is unrelated to the current context. The Russians and the Turks have in the past engaged in full scale military conflicts with one another regarding struggles over control and influence in key regions, particularly the Balkans and the Black Sea, and Ankara regards Moscow as standing threat to its interests. The policies of the current leaders of both countries only fan such tensions. Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin represent aggressive and ambitious leaders driven by the desire to transform their respective countries into the powers they once were. Indeed, the two heads of state have been referred to as “sultan” and “czar,” implying the figure that each seeks to become.

Second, the already charged relationship between Turkey and Russia has been affected by strategic considerations and political interests relating to the current reality in the Middle East and Europe. The two countries do not see eye to eye regarding the crisis in Syria or the preferable solution. Whereas Turkey has adopted the ultimate goal of Assad's removal from power, Russia regards Assad's ongoing rule as a necessary condition for the promotion of stability in the collapsed state and the preservation of its own strategic interests in the Middle East. Although both countries formally oppose the Islamic State and seek to weaken it, they are actually making use of it to garner legitimacy for their activities in Syria, which are part of efforts of much greater

importance to them: Turkey's efforts against the Kurds and Russia's efforts against the opposition groups that are not aligned with the Islamic State (the majority of which are supported by Turkey). Against the backdrop of the crisis in Ukraine and the West's united opposition against Putin (by Turkey's fellow members in NATO), the conflicting interests of Russia and Turkey in Syria, along with Turkey's staunch opposition to Russian military intervention in Syria, has placed the two countries on a collision course.

Without a doubt the confrontation between Turkey and Russia heightens the instability in the region by reducing the possibility of concluding the ongoing crisis in Syria and successfully contending with the Islamic State. That being the case, a variety of future scenarios in the Turkish-Russian confrontation are now possible, ranging from containment of the confrontation and a return to normal relations, to mutual diplomatic and economic hostility (as in the case of Turkish-Israeli relations), to military escalation (such as the launching of S-400 missiles or the downing of a Turkish aircraft, a cyber attack, or more extensive military action). It is difficult to assess which is the most likely scenario, but understanding is growing within Turkey that downing the Russian plane was a far-reaching step. Erdogan has expressed a willingness to issue a veiled apology, and both parties may now begin to conduct themselves with caution. Still, even at this stage, and regardless of the different scenarios, Israel can derive a number of lessons and insights from the confrontation.

The Tactical Lesson

First and foremost, the interception of the Russian plane highlights the minimal room for error; at the same time, the Turks could have exercised restraint and refrained from downing the Russian plane. The radar images released indicate that the Russian aircraft did indeed enter Turkish airspace, but that its penetration was negligible (lasting only 10-15 seconds) and clearly reflected no hostile intent toward Turkey. The plane was not intercepted accidentally, but it is unclear who gave the final authorization for the interception. In Israel, efforts must be made to ensure that such authority remains at the highest possible political and military level.

The unfolding of events, from the moment the decision was made to intercept the plane, highlights the need to ensure maximum control over decision making in the future regarding events with the potential for escalation that might entangle Israel. Although in Israel existing escalation control mechanisms are sufficiently effective, and not all warlike events lead to full scale war, Israel must nonetheless develop strategic thinking regarding mechanisms for preventing escalation and concluding campaigns, even after a proactive or reactive initiated action that is regarded as of essential importance.

On the level of coordination with Russia in light of its military involvement in Syria, Israel must maintain the understandings reached with Russia in October 2015 and

consider whether they should now be sharpened, as a lesson based on the incident on the Turkish border. Moreover, the stationing of S-400 missile systems changes the rules of airspace for Israel as well, and requires the establishment of a stringent mechanism to prevent an Israeli-Russian collision. Israel currently has no significant points of friction with Turkey, but must nonetheless derive the right lessons. Turkey has proven that it is not trigger-shy and that it makes good on its threats: approximately two years ago, Turkey warned that it would intercept any plane that violated its sovereignty. Looking ahead, and based on previous clashes (as in the case of the flotilla to Gaza in 2010), it is important that Israel remain mindful of this in the event of a potential confrontation with a Turkish flotilla or aircraft that may approach Israel's borders in the future.

The Strategic Lesson

The next question, therefore, concerns the Israeli decision whether or not to choose a side in the current conflict between Turkey and Russia, and, if so, which side to pick. With the exception of attacks attributed to it against high quality weapons transferred from Syria to Hezbollah, Israel is not a central actor in the internal conflict in Syria or among the external parties involved, and is certainly not a party to the current confrontation between Turkey and Russia. However, an assessment of Israeli interests regarding this confrontation reveals a complex situation.

On the one hand, on a bilateral level, Israel has a clear interest in supporting Moscow. The two countries enjoy positive, well established, stable relations and have thus far managed to successfully navigate the quagmire of the Russian military presence in Syria. In addition, Israel's relationship with Turkey under Erdogan is unstable and, since 2009, has been characterized by ongoing hostility that apparently will be difficult to allay as long as Erdogan remains a dominant force in Turkish decision making. Taking Russia's side may also bring economic benefit to Israel, as Russia has imposed economic sanctions on Turkey, whereas for its part Israel could provide Russia with a partial replacement for Turkey in agriculture, tourism, and other areas.

On the other hand, actually siding with Turkey, which opposes the radical axis in Syria, would better serve Israel's strategic logic and fundamental interests. Russian operations in Syria, under cover of the struggle against the Islamic State, provide an international seal of approval to Israel's most dangerous enemies – Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime. In this context, Turkey and Israel share a common interest, which includes Assad's removal from power, the weakening of Iranian dominance in Syria, and the resulting blow this would mean for Hezbollah. A Turkish signal of willingness to work in cooperation with Israel to address these threats and challenges, and consequently to reduce its hostility toward Israel, would bring to the table other issues with the potential for mutual profits, such as the opening of the Turkish market to Israeli gas (a need that

will increase with the reduced supply of Russian gas to Turkey); an improvement in Israeli integration in NATO activity (which has encountered difficulties due to Turkish opposition); and Turkey's return as a positive and central actor in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians and the Arab world (which is in need of a creative maneuver to break the current impasse).

Perhaps Israel's contradictory interests in the current confrontation between Turkey and Russia can also shed light on what is the most important goal at the moment, for the United States and the European Union as well: the formulation of a strategy that would lead, whether simultaneously or incrementally, to the weakening and removal of the two negative forces operating in Syria – the Assad regime on the one hand and the Islamic State on the other.

Finding a solution to the crisis in Syria will require joint action incorporating military, diplomatic, and political efforts. Israeli creativity in this context should emphasize the inability to reunite Syria and the need to stabilize the area through a re-demarcation of borders, perhaps within a federative framework. Regardless of the solution found, the lesson from the Turkish-Russian confrontation for all parties involved in Syria is that in the complex Middle East, rivalry between two parties should not be allowed to render a third party acceptable. In other words, the desire to weaken the Islamic State cannot make the Iranian-backed Assad regime any more acceptable, and at the same time, opposition to Russian involvement in Syria cannot make the Islamic State or the al-Nusra Front a legitimate replacement for Assad. The challenge, then, is to find the right overall strategy, backed by the decisiveness, resources, and ground forces necessary to simultaneously fight Assad and the Salafi jihadist forces in Syria, and in so doing, to create a sustainable reality in this arena.

