

# Russian-Turkish Relations: Contemporary Dilemmas of Past Empires

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## Introduction

Russian-Turkish relations have a long and charged historic dimension, and competition between Turkey and Russia still exists today, as reflected in geopolitical, economic, and even ideological aspects. In the current reality created by the upheaval in the Arab world, there is a struggle underway for influence in reshaping the regional order in the Middle East. Russia and Turkey find themselves involved in this process and in competition with one another to enhance their ability to influence regional developments. At the same time, since the establishment of the Turkish republic, Turkey has traditionally shied away from direct confrontation with Russia, and the question arises whether this dynamic will prevail in future relations between the two countries as well.

The fact that Turkey is perceived as the local representative of NATO and the West in the Middle East affects its relations with Russia and the prospects for tightening these relations. At the same time, Turkey is an independent regional player with its own agenda. Especially in the context of the civil war in Syria, both Russia and Turkey have differing interests and agendas, and they therefore find themselves on opposite sides of the regional fence. Friction between the two countries, however, is not confined to the Middle East, and extends likewise to the Central Asia and Caucasus areas of the former Soviet Union, and the developing conflict in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the article will look into

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how the tension between Russia and Turkey affects these countries' complex relations with Israel, as Israel's involvement in the three areas under discussion makes Israel an important factor that affects Moscow and Ankara's strategic calculations.

### **Russian-Turkish Relations: Background**

Competitive relations between Turkey and Russia are not a new phenomenon. The two countries were at war with each other on many occasions between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, and the tenor of their relations fluctuated over the twentieth century. Hostility between the Czarist and Ottoman empires gave way to cooperation between the new countries that succeeded these empires, followed in turn by Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952, which put the Turkey and Russia on opposite sides in the Cold War. The 1990s featured increasing Turkish intervention in the countries of the former Soviet Union, especially in the Caucasus, where Turkey and Russia supported different sides in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia supported Armenia, while Turkey supported Azerbaijan. In addition, Turkey supported Georgia, which is in conflict with Russia. Russia has also cooperated with Iran against Turkish interests in what has been called the "Great Game" in Central Asia.

At the same time, economic relations between Russia and Turkey have flourished, overshadowing the political friction. Russia is Turkey's most important trading partner, overtaking Germany in 2008. Most of this trade (\$24 billion out of \$32 billion)<sup>2</sup> consists of Russian energy exports to Turkey, making Turkey the second largest export market for Russian energy resources. In the reverse direction, Russia is Turkey's third largest export market. The two countries are seeking to increase the volume of trade between them to \$100 billion by 2015.<sup>3</sup> As part of this trend, Turkey has also become a leading destination for Russian tourists (3.5 million Russians out of an annual total of 31 million tourists visiting Turkey), and there have been significant private business investments across both countries.<sup>4</sup> The two countries also initially shared an understanding concerning the construction of energy transit routes through Turkish territory. In early 2000, however, Turkey opted for cooperation with the West in the Nabucco project, which was designed to transport energy resources from the Caspian seashore to Europe through Turkish territory, thereby bypassing both Russia and Iran. Russia's retaliation for this choice came in the South Stream Project, which transports gas to Europe

through the Black Sea (in addition to building a pipeline to China on Russian territory from the Caspian Sea and another pipeline to Europe through the Baltic Sea – the Nord Stream).<sup>5</sup>

Like Russia, Turkey is pursuing a policy adapted to the developing multi-polar global system. For example, since April 2013 Turkey has been a “dialogue partner” of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (in which the prominent partners are Russia and China).<sup>6</sup> The zero problems policy steered by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has facilitated further development of Turkish-Russian commercial ties, while the issues in dispute keep a low profile. To be sure, Turkey’s concomitant efforts to regain its dominant status in areas historically under its control (including the Middle East) have posed a challenge to Russian strategic interests. Yet even here, sufficient spheres for cooperation between Russia and Turkey exist, including economic ties and Turkish assistance to Russia in rehabilitating its standing in the Muslim world. And while relations worsened with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which put the two countries on opposing sides, particularly in Syria, the two sides have channels for dialogue and are trying to maintain at least the impression of proper relations between them, while keeping the dispute between them under control. The high level visits to Turkey, by Russian President Vladimir Putin (in December 2012) and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (in April 2013), in addition to a series of reciprocal working visits during the year, reflect these attempts to calm the situation. And in keeping with Turkey’s traditional policy of trying to avoid a direct conflict with Russia,<sup>7</sup> current events in Syria indicate that Turkey has yielded to Russian pressure to a considerable extent.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Former Soviet Union**

One of the three main areas of friction between Russia and Turkey is the southern part of the former Soviet Union. From Russia’s perspective, this region is not only rich in energy resources; it is also strategically important, due to its position at the intersection between Russia and the Middle East, which makes it Russia’s “soft underbelly.” This region is in fact a theater of Russian confrontation with a number of parties: the West; radical Islam, which constitutes a threat to Russia’s territorial integrity; and China – and while at the moment China is a partner of Russia in the international arena, a renewal of the rivalry between them is only a question of time. As Russia struggles to achieve its proper place

as an equal partner in the international arena in the framework of the multi-polar world that it champions, it feels that its primary challenge right now comes from the West. As part of that conflict with the West, Russia is acting to strengthen its grip in the former Soviet Union in order to prevent the countries in the region from joining NATO, which wants to expand eastward (NATO has actually done this in Eastern Europe, and even in certain countries of the former Soviet Union). Russia's 2008 war against Georgia, for example, was part of this policy of using force to prevent other countries that were part of the Soviet Union from crossing over to the Western camp.

This competition for control of the region, known as the "New Great Game," is conducted mainly through economic levers. Russia believes that its main problem in the region is the US effort to gain access to the area's energy resources. For its part, China is promoting an economic route from its territory to Europe through Central Asia and Turkey, referred to as the New Silk Road. At the same time, the US is trying to launch a route in the opposite direction southward, toward India, while bypassing Russia, China, and Iran. Russia is trying to thwart these plans, which are attempts to bypass its territory in the construction of trade routes, including the building of energy transport pipelines from the Caspian Sea area, both eastward and westward.

In recent years Turkey has become one of the key regional players in this theater. As a country that once controlled large parts of these countries, and given its ethnic, cultural, and religious affinity to their populations, Turkey has been active in this region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while promoting a pan-Turkish agenda. Turkey has invested considerable resources in the construction of cultural and economic infrastructures in these countries, and the Turkish Gulen movement has even established many educational institutions in the region.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Turkey is also actively expanding its economic involvement.

While Russia could tolerate these measures, political intervention in the region is a red line, which if crossed is liable to cause an open conflict. Russia interprets all of Turkey's actions in the region as supported by the West, with Turkey helping to promote NATO's goals in this critical region, in part by hindering efforts by Russia, as well as by China and Iran. And while Russia is relatively willing to accept competition in Central Asia, the situation is far more acute in the Caucasus. Russia and Turkey are on a collision course there, with Turkey in effect becoming a strategic partner

of Azerbaijan and Georgia, which together create a political axis and lately also a security one (the three countries have even conducted joint military maneuvers).<sup>10</sup> For all intents and purposes, this cooperation cuts Russia off from the Middle East. Russia, which seeks a suitable answer to this challenge, is operating its own joint axis with Armenia and Iran, and is backing Armenia in its struggle in Azerbaijan for control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia is even threatening military action against Azerbaijan and Georgia, and has substantiated these messages with military exercises in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Yet despite Russian fears, it appears that Turkey has in effect accepted Russian dominance in the region, and is unwilling to enter into a direct conflict with Russia, as in the Russian-Georgian war, when Turkey delayed the passage of American ships bearing aid to Georgia through the Turkish Straits.<sup>11</sup> Turkey also supports Russia's position in principle that the Black Sea should remain without any American or NATO presence, except for Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Middle East**

Since the shift in Turkish policy and its greater emphasis on the Middle East, Russian-Turkish disagreements over this region have intensified. Russia, which has invested heavily in an ongoing effort to position itself in the region as a power equivalent in influence to the US, finds itself on a collision course with Turkey, which is claiming regional leadership for itself, both in its own right and as a NATO member. The ongoing complex disturbances in the Arab world have created a new situation in both the Middle East and the international situation in general. Consequently, powers with interests in the region, including Russia, must take action to renew their influence there, and to adapt their policy to the new challenges in order to shape the future regional order.

In the years preceding the upheaval in the Arab world, Russia successfully fostered close relations with the radical anti-Western axis, along with promoting its security and economic goals. In tandem, Russia consolidated its regional status as a mediator in regional crises. However, most of these assets have been undermined by the turbulence in the Arab world. Specific negative consequences for Russia include the heightened position of political Islam, which threatens to spill over into Russia itself; the strengthened Sunni axis, which, backed by the West, is taking action against the radical axis; and growing competition over shaping the regional order and attaining hegemonic status in the region. Russia's new

goals include preserving its presence in the region, which it regards as an essential element in its global objectives, and cultivating its interest in the process of shaping the future regional order in order to ensure its status and that of its supporters.

Following an initial period of confusion and searching for solutions in the effort to offset the damage caused by the regional upheaval and rehabilitate the standing it had painstakingly achieved, Russia settled on its current policy, which poses many challenges to its regional and global rivals. Following a general reassessment based on the negative lessons learned from the revolutionary events in North Africa, Russia chose its current policy of continuing and even increasing its support for the radical axis in the Middle East. Its principal measure in this context is support for the Assad regime in its struggle for survival, which involves shielding the battlefield area from outside intervention while supplying direct support for the regime. This strategy has so far proved successful in buying time for both the regime and Russia. In tandem, however, Russia has invested much effort to achieve a dialogue with the other players in Syria and the region, with the clear aim of laying the groundwork for remaining in Syria should Assad fall and the radical axis weaken. Russian efforts involving Egypt, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf countries can also be cited in this context.

For its part, Turkey has challenged these Russian interests by its efforts to achieve leadership in the region and in the Muslim world. Its activities to this end include direct aid to the Syrian rebels and, as the most significant available power in the region (Turkey has the second largest army in NATO), readiness to intervene militarily in Syria – which has thus far been deflected in part by Russian opposition.<sup>13</sup> It has also labored to play a key role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by serving as an important intermediary in the region. Even before the upheaval in the Arab world, Turkish policy had neo-Ottoman aspects, and Turkey is continuing in this direction, which is frequently troubling to Turkey's neighbors and even its allies. This is also the main background for the emerging new conflict between Turkey and Russia. Indeed, following a period of restraint and an effort to present an image of proper relations, Russian-Turkish relations have deteriorated, especially since October 2012, when Turkey forced the landing of a Syrian plane flying from Moscow with 35 passengers, including Russian civilians. Turkey asserted that the plane contained banned weapons,<sup>14</sup> and the incident slightly

delayed President Putin's visit to Turkey. Yet although the two countries hold opposing positions, the events in Syria have had a mutually negative effect: on Russia, because it is on the verge of losing an ally, and on Turkey, because instability in Syria has a negative domestic effect.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to Iran, there is ostensibly more agreement between the two countries. Neither has any interest in Iran achieving nuclear weapons capability, but they both strongly oppose any American or Israeli attack on Iran, claiming that negotiations alone can achieve a real change in Iranian policy.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, despite this agreement on the goal and the means, only Russia is a P5+1 member. Given the significant economic ties between Turkey and Iran, exclusion from this forum is difficult for Turkey, and the Turkish foreign minister has called to expand the forum to include both Turkey and Saudi Arabia (P5+3).<sup>17</sup>

### **The Mediterranean Theater**

Another theater of conflict where friction has intensified is the Mediterranean Sea region. Turkey's interests in the eastern basin of this sea are naturally among its most significant, due to its accessibility to the Middle East countries. Russia's significant interest is relations with additional countries in the region, such as Greece and Cyprus, and its competition with the West, with an emphasis on NATO countries and fleets, especially the US 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet.

Russian interest in naval activity in the region has increased recently with its assistance to Assad's government, in part by safeguarding Syria's coastline against foreign intervention,<sup>18</sup> especially given its concern about possible action by the Turkish fleet. Another influential consideration concerns the natural gas reserves discovered in the eastern Mediterranean basin. Russia has a major interest in being involved in the gas issue in order to maintain its current monopoly on the supply of natural gas to Europe. For its part, Turkey is an interested party because it needs access to additional energy resources, both as a consumer and as a route for energy transportation, and in order to prevent the Republic of Cyprus from benefiting from gas production as long as the Cypriot issue remains unresolved and the rights of Turkish Cypriots are in question. Turkey also wishes to find an answer to Russia's emerging cooperation with Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

Russia's naval presence in the Mediterranean is currently restricted to the Syrian port of Tartus, whose future is unclear. Russia would certainly

be interested in extending its naval presence in the region to additional bases. Options such as Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Malta, for example, are under examination. In recent years, Russia has maintained a naval presence in the region by dispatching flotillas and individual ships on a rotational basis. The Russian fleet also recently began to conduct major exercises in the eastern Mediterranean basin,<sup>19</sup> and this year Russia announced a decision to station a permanent flotilla in the Mediterranean. The permanent presence of the Russian fleet in a sensitive war zone constitutes a crude statement, indicating deterrent intentions towards the parties capable of jeopardizing Russian interests.<sup>20</sup> Most of this activity is clearly directed at Turkey, the main party challenging Russian activity in this sphere. Russia is also challenging Turkey by conducting naval maneuvers near the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. Threatening Russian messages were sent to Turkey more than once in these contexts.

### Implications for Israel

As depicted above, Russia and Turkey are acting, each in its own way, to bolster their standing and enhance their ability to shape the future regional order in the Middle East. At the same time, both countries have complex relations with Israel. In the current situation, Israel's potential significance in any possible regional scenario is clear to both countries, and they are accordingly interested in developing cooperative relations with Israel or, alternatively, pushing Israel out of the regional game to the greatest extent possible. In addition, Israel constitutes an active party in the other spheres discussed, with implications for Russian-Turkish relations and the countries' respective policies.

*The Former Soviet Union:* Israel is active in a number of Central Asian and Caucasian countries in a variety of areas, not infrequently in competition with other external players, headed by Russia and Turkey. Russia has mixed feelings on this matter (for example, Russia is clearly pressuring Israel to halt its cooperation with Georgia), but it is much more hostile to Turkish and Islamic activity in the countries in this region. In particular, the question of closer relations between Israel and Azerbaijan is attracting attention from both Russia and Turkey: Russia supports Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, while Turkey's relations with Israel have been in crisis in recent years, with Turkey seeking to punish Israel for the *Mavi Marmara* incident, and to pressure Azerbaijan to cool its relations with Israel.

*The Middle East:* Given its challenges in the Middle East and the Muslim world, Russia regards Israel as a desirable alternative partner, as cooperation with Israel contributes to Russia's efforts to escape its isolation in the Middle East caused by the negative consequences of the Arab Spring. Meantime, relations between Turkey and Israel are still tense, despite interfacing interests, including the future of Syria.

*The Eastern Mediterranean Basin:* Relations between the three actors in this sphere are even more complicated. The tension between Russian and Turkish fleets off the Syrian coast play a role, as does the conflict over the gas fields in this area and Russia's traditional pro-Cyprus policy. Over the past year, Russia focused on forming a political axis with a number of countries in the region, such as Greece and Cyprus and possibly other Balkan countries, aimed in part against Turkey; Russia regards Israel as a suitable partner in this framework. Beyond this, Russia has an interest in cooperating with Israel in gas production. This development naturally presents Turkey with a difficult dilemma. Turkey, which is interested in eastern Mediterranean gas as both a consumer and as a route for gas exports, will try to pressure both Israel and the Republic of Cyprus in this context. Turkey will try to exploit Cyprus's economic difficulties to convince the US and the EU to increase their pressure on the Greek Cypriots to work toward a solution of the Cypriot dispute. If progress toward resolution of the Cyprus issue occurs, this could not only eliminate the dependence of Greece and Cyprus on Russian support, but also threaten the Russian monopoly on gas exports to Europe. Israel is important in this context, because if Israel cooperates with the Greek Cypriots in the construction of joint facilities for liquefying natural gas (LNG), this will in effect bypass Turkey, and will also have a negative impact on the chances of achieving a resolution of the Cypriot question.

Thus, each of the three theaters has potential for Israeli cooperation with Russia or Turkey. At the same time, it is difficult to find issues where the three countries have sufficient common interests to act jointly. Furthermore, given the importance that Israel attaches to its relations with the US, there are limitations on its ability to improve its relations with Russia. As an ally of the US, Turkey is ostensibly a more comfortable partner for Israel, but Turkey's efforts to be a more independent player in the international theater, particularly its ambition to exert more influence in the Middle East, also limit Israel's ability to develop relations with it.

## Notes

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- 1 Events in the Balkan countries can also be regarded as an additional area of potential friction, but due to space limitations, we have chosen to focus on theaters that are more relevant to Israel.
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- 3 Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics," *Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2013): 167.
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- 5 Ahmet O. Evin, "Energy and Turkey's Neighborhood," in Ronald H. Linden et al, eds., *Turkey and its Neighbors: Foreign Relations in Transition* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2012), p. 103.
- 6 "Turkey First NATO State with Shanghai Cooperation Organization Ties," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 29, 2013.
- 7 Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey Fears Russia too Much to Intervene in Syria," *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2013.
- 8 American unwillingness to intervene militarily in the conflict has also contributed to this stance.
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- 10 "Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia to Hold Joint Military Exercises," *TRT English*, February 7, 2013.
- 11 Bechev, "Putin's Visit Rekindles the Russia-Turkey Affair."
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- 13 Cagaptay, "Turkey Fears Russia Too Much to Intervene in Syria."
- 14 "Turkey Grounds Syrian Plane Suspected of Carrying Weapons Destined for Assad Troops," *Haaretz*, October 10, 2012.
- 15 Gokhan Bacik, "Turkey and Russia in the Arab Spring: Straining Old Rifts Further?" *GMF On Turkey*, August 16, 2012.
- 16 Trenin, "From Damascus to Kabul," pp. 45-46.
- 17 "Turkey's Ties with Qatar, Saudi Arabia Unlikely to be Limited to Syrian Crisis," *Today's Zaman*, February 10, 2013.
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- 20 "Cyprus Crisis Raises Security Questions," *Financial Times*, March 21, 2013.