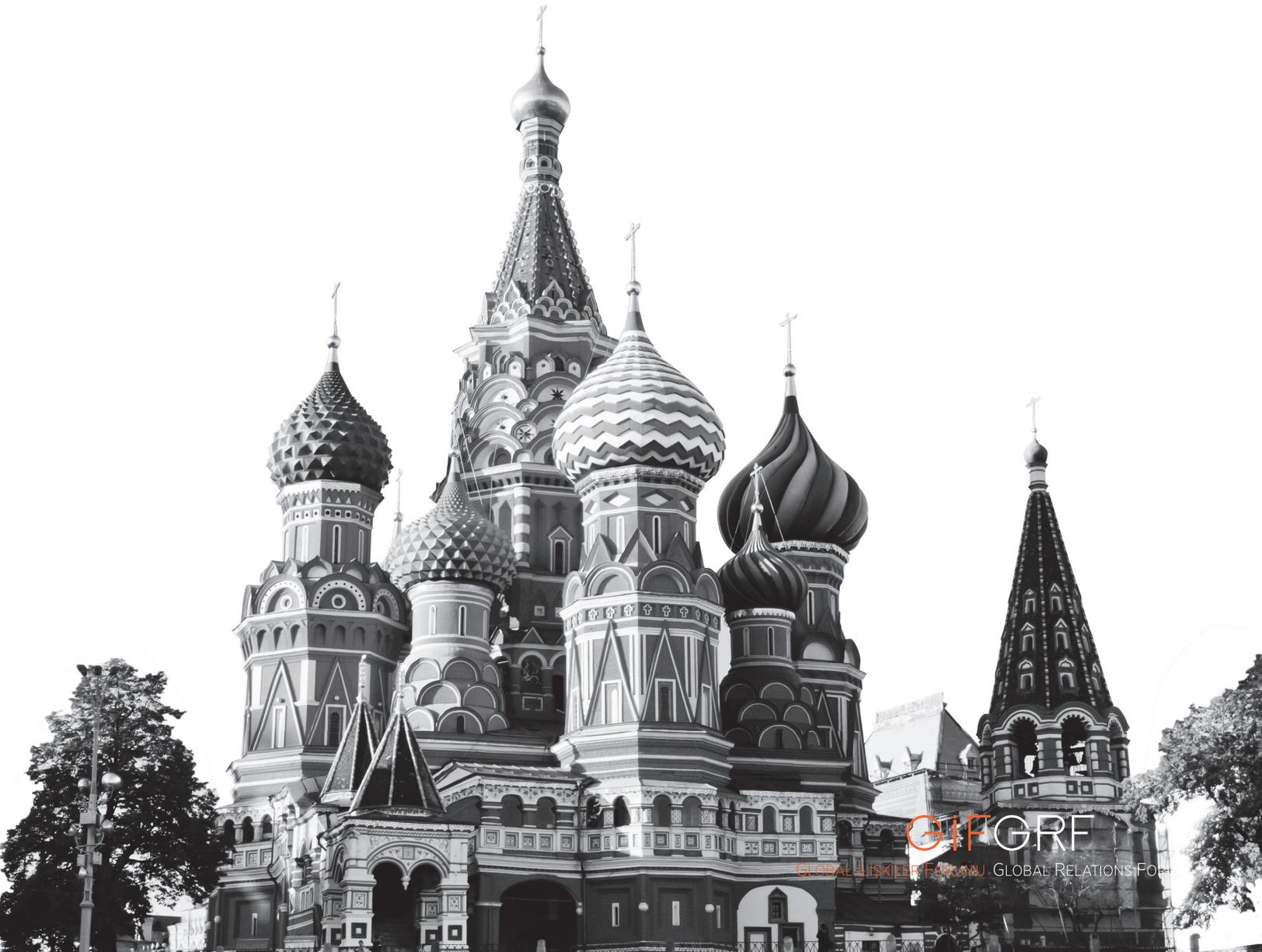


THE RUSSIAN-TURKISH RAPPROCHEMENT: Policy Options for Ankara and its Allies

DR. CHRIS MILLER

Yale University, Ph.D. in History



GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM YOUNG ACADEMICS PROGRAM POLICY PAPER SERIES No.4

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Policy Paper Series No.4

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Global Relations Forum (GRF), founded in 2009 with the support of prominent Turkish leaders in business, government and academia, is an independent, nonprofit membership association committed to being a platform for engaging, informing, and stimulating its members and all interested individuals in all matters related to international affairs and global issues.

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This paper entitled “*The Russian-Turkish Rapprochement: Policy Options for Ankara and its Allies*” is authored by Dr. Chris Miller. GRF thanks him for his contribution and commitment to this effort.

GRF convened the following group of distinguished members to evaluate and guide Dr. Chris Miller’s paper:

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The Russian-Turkish Rapprochement: Policy Options for Ankara and its Allies

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The fifth paper of GRF Young Academics Program's Policy Paper Series, "The Russian-Turkish Rapprochement: Policy Options for Ankara and its Allies" by Dr. Chris Miller was finalized in September 2016, amid ongoing developments in Russian-Turkish relations and the continuing war in Syria. Due to the region's fast-changing dynamics, some of the events mentioned in the paper may not be completely up-to-date at the time the paper meets its audience.

Executive Summary

This paper examines Turkish-Russian relations in the context of the Syrian war. It argues that after twenty-four years of relatively cordial relations, in which Turkey and Russia focused primarily on economic relations, ties between the two countries are in great flux. The Syrian War, combined with a renewal of active conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish nationalist groups, has introduced many new points of stress in Turkish-Russian relations at a time when both countries need each other's assent to achieve their aims in Syria. Cooperation is also needed, and more likely, in a number of other regions including the Caucasus and the Black Sea. The paper concludes by outlining potential strategies for Turkey, Russia and NATO countries.

1. Introduction

Not since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 have Turkish-Russian relations been in such flux. In an instant, Turkey's shooting down of a Russian military plane in November 2015 brought the two countries to the brink of a dangerous confrontation. Many analysts predicted a long-term return to tension reminiscent of the Cold War. The danger is evident. Russian planes have repeatedly violated Turkey's airspace. Turkish-backed militias in Syria are trying to topple Bashar al-Assad, Russia's ally. Fighting recently erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh, between Armenia, which hosts a Russian military base, and Azerbaijan, a close Turkish ally. But then the conflict seemed to disappear as soon as it had arrived. Turkey apologized to Russia in July 2016 for shooting down its jet, and in August the two countries' presidents met in St. Petersburg to discuss rebuilding economic ties and resolving political disputes.

This paper examines the rise of the Russia-Turkey entente over the past two decades, its spectacular collapse in 2015, and the prospects for its long-term rehabilitation. The relationship between the two countries has obvious ramifications for Syria, the Black Sea, and other regions where Turkish and Russian interests intersect. It is also of crucial importance for NATO members, including the United States and the European powers. Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952; the United States and European NATO members are pledged to defend it against foreign attack, even at the cost of using nuclear weapons. Yet, since the failed coup attempt against Turkey's government in July 2016, relations between Turkey and its Western partners have been filled with mutual recrimination. Many Turks accuse Americans and Europeans of not understanding the threat that the coup attempt posed, and of being overly critical of government efforts to tame the groups believed to have launched the coup attempt. Many Western analysts, meanwhile, argue that Turkey's ruling AK Party has used the coup as an excuse to purge its enemies and undermine the rule of law.

Amid these bitter exchanges with its NATO partners, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia has, many analysts argued, opened the door to a broader realignment. According to this thesis, Turkey will recognize that it has more to gain from cooperating with Eurasian countries than with the West. Turkey's membership in NATO could be questioned, shifting the balance of influence in regions such as the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean in Russia's favor. Russia, meanwhile, would benefit from splits within NATO as well as from obtaining a valuable new ally. If such a realignment happens, it would affect every other country in the region. How likely is the current Turkish-Russian rapprochement to lead to a broader, lasting realignment?

The analysis that follows examines the issues that are likely to be at the forefront of Russian, Turkish, and other NATO countries' relations over the next several years. The aftermath of the coup is likely to sour relations between Turkey and its Western partners for some time to come. Yet, that does not eliminate the shared interests between Turkey, Europe, and the United States, in both political and economic terms. More importantly, the recent summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has done little to resolve the main underlying differences in those two countries' interests. This paper will sketch out the areas of cooperation and conflict in the Russian-Turkish relationship, and examine potential strategies that Ankara, Moscow, and Western powers might adopt in the coming years. The analysis will suggest that though there is much room for cooperation between Turkey and Russia, long-standing conflicts will not be easily resolved. Expectations of an enduring entente between Turkey and Russia are not likely to be realized.

2. Strategic Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus

Any analysis of the prospects of Turkish-Russian relations must begin with an assessment of each party's strategic interests. What goals are these powers seeking to achieve? And how do they prioritize these goals? Analysis of these questions requires some guesswork, since even when countries do explicitly list and prioritize their goals, one must assess whether such statements are accurate, and whether they have changed over time. Many of these goals change when governments change, as does the prioritization. Nonetheless, it is possible to state the main goals of Russia, Turkey and other NATO countries in the region with some certainty, and to examine how they intersect.

a. Turkey's Aims

Turkey's most pressing foreign policy goal is to prevent the emergence of a hostile, semi-independent Kurdish state on Syrian territory. The most influential Kurdish militias in Syria have extensive and historical links with the PKK, a terrorist group that has waged a decades-long war against the Turkish state. Turkey fears that as Syria's Kurds gain power, territory, and arms, the scope of anti-government violence on Turkish territory will increase, too. Given its large Kurdish population and the long history of violence by the PKK, Turkish concerns are understandable. In contrast with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, with which Ankara has good relations, Turkey's government sees Syria's Kurds as a threat that must be contained. Over the past several years, marginalizing Syria's Kurds and pushing their militias back from the Turkish-Syrian border has been a primary — if unsuccessful — goal of Ankara's Syria policy.

Though establishing security vis-à-vis Syria's Kurds is Turkey's main foreign policy goal, it is not, of course, the only one. Ankara would also like to see Syria stabilized in a way that eliminates ISIS (also known as Daesh, ISIL, and the Islamic State) and limits the flow of refugees across its border. Despite post-coup rhetoric, Ankara continues to value membership in NATO, and the security guarantees from the United States and other Western powers that NATO entails. Finally, Turkey's government wishes to avoid any increase of fighting in the South Caucasus or the Black Sea region, while maintaining its interests in those regions.

b. Russia's Aims

Russia's priorities differ from Turkey's both in scope and on specific details. Unlike Turkey, whose foreign policy is predominantly regional, Russia sees itself as a global power and has the resources needed to achieve at least some global aims. As a result, Moscow's interests in the region are only part of its broader agenda in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, in Central Asia, and in the Pacific. The Kremlin has historically prioritized its interests in Europe over the Middle East, and today is no different. Within the region where Russia's interests intersect Turkey's, however, Moscow's main aim is the maintenance of the Assad system, though not necessarily Assad personally, in Syria. That goal is closely followed by efforts to limit the spread of militant groups in Syria, not only ISIS but also other Islamist groups that are supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other regional powers. Russia's interest in bolstering the Syrian government stems from its general opposition to regime change, its historic ties with Syria's military, and its military assets in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In addition to these aims in Syria, Russia also seeks to maintain its influence in both Azerbaijan and Armenia, both of which border Turkey. Armenia, as noted above, is often seen as a Kremlin client given the Russian military base it hosts. But Russia remains influential in Azerbaijan, too, given its extensive arms sales in the region. The Kremlin wishes to retain this position of leverage. At the same time, Russia also wishes to discourage the expansion of American and NATO military power in the Black Sea region. The Kremlin welcomes contradictions between Turkey's policies and those of other NATO members, though it likely does not believe that pushing Ankara out of NATO via calculated provocations is a realistic policy aim.

c. Other NATO Members' Aims

Describing the goals of other NATO members is complicated by the diversity of the alliance. Poland and Portugal, to take just two examples, face very different threats. Broadly speaking, the alliance members can be grouped between 'the East' and 'the South.' Those on the Eastern border tend to prefer deterring Russia, while those in the South are more concerned about terrorism and the risk of instability spread across the Mediterranean, with the wars in Syria and Libya looming large. NATO's bigger members, above all the United States, but also Britain and France, believe they have to deal with both 'Eastern' and 'Southern' challenges at the same time. Indeed, Russia's emergence as a major player in Syria has reduced some of the distinction between the two regions.

In the region under analysis — the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East — NATO members (members other than Turkey, that is) have four broad goals. The first is to preserve the alliance's credibility and coherence while avoiding a conflict with Russia over Turkey. The prospect of another military clash between Turkey and Russia holds great risks for the alliance, because backing Turkey risks war with Russia, while failing to back Turkey risks the credibility of NATO's defense commitments in other regions. Avoiding having to make such a decision is a key goal.

Syria is the second main area of interest for other NATO members. Here, Western powers have contradictory aims. They want to defeat ISIS, given the continuing threat of terrorism. Most remain rhetorically committed to Bashar Assad's departure as Syria's president, though the importance placed on this point has decreased. Halting refugee flows out of Syria and thus into Europe is an additional goal. Western leaders hope to accomplish all of this at relatively little cost, with only several countries willing to launch airstrikes against ISIS positions in Syria. Finally, outside of Syria, most NATO members would like to maintain the status quo in the Caucasus and the Black Sea and prevent new or expanded conflicts in the region.

3. An Era of Russian-Turkish Convergence, 1991-2014

Russia and Turkey have gone to war at least a dozen times over the past five centuries. They have clashed in the Caucasus, battled over the Balkans, and struggled for control of the straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the great prize sought by so many empire builders. But tumultuous though the two countries' history may be, the quarter century before 2015 was a period not only of relative calm and cooperation, but even of friendly relations. Centuries of rivalry seemed a memory from the distant past. The end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 meant that geopolitical questions faded to the background in Turkish-Russian relations. Economic cooperation moved toward the foreground. Ankara and Moscow found that they had much about which they agreed. And working together proved profitable for political leaders and for business groups alike.

Trade between the two countries boomed. Millions of Russian tourists visited Antalya and other Turkish beach resorts every year, constituting, until last year, Turkey's second largest group of tourists, behind only Germans.¹ Before trade sanctions were imposed, Russia was one of Turkey's largest export markets. Russians purchased a wide variety of Turkish goods, from agricultural products such as lemons and tomatoes, to textiles and finished clothing, to cars and other manufactured parts. Turkish exports to Russia peaked at \$7 billion in 2013.²

The most significant facet of the two countries' economic relationship, however, was and remains gas. Turkey is Russia's second largest consumer of natural gas, consuming 13% of Russia's gas exports, behind only Germany by volume of consumption. Reasonably priced gas imports are an economic necessity for Turkey, which has little domestic energy production; Moscow provides slightly over half of Turkey's gas.³ It has benefited greatly from access to Russia's massive energy supplies. Indeed, the gas relationship is so crucial for both countries that it has survived the recent political storm wholly intact. Russian economic sanctions on Turkey sharply cut exports of agricultural and manufactured goods to Russia. But even when relations were at their bottom, neither side proposed any limitations on the gas trade.⁴

¹ Available data on Russian tourists in Turkey date back to 1998. Russia was the third largest group of tourists in Turkey from 1998-2003, behind Germany and the United Kingdom. Russia became the second largest group of tourists from 2004 to 2014. Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, "Tourism Statistics: Border Statistics," *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism*, Accessed May 31, 2016, <http://www.kulturturizm.gov.tr/EN,153018/number-of-arriving-departing-visitors-foreigners-and-ci-.html>.

² Turkish exports to Russia in 2013 were \$7.11 billion, the highest amount in the years 1992 to 2014. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Products that Turkey Exports to Russia," *MIT Atlas: The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, Accessed May 31, 2016.

³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Turkey: International Energy Data and Analysis," August 6, 2015, https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/countries_long/Turkey/turkey.pdf.

⁴ Selin Girit, "Turkey Faces Big Losses as Russia Sanctions Bite," BBC News, January 2, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>; Keith Bradsher, "Tensions With Russia Add to a Chill in Turkey's Economy," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/business/international/tensions-with-russia-add-to-a-chill-in-turkeys-economy.html>.

At the same time as the two countries' business ties boomed, political shifts brought Russia and Turkey closer. The EU's delaying of negotiations over Turkey's accession threw into doubt Turkey's Western orientation and caused many in the country to question its political identity.⁵ These were not new questions for Turkey, but in the years after the mid-2000s they were increasingly answered by looking away from the West. The Arab uprisings briefly raised hopes that Turkey could play a leading role in a newly democratic, and still religiously devout, Middle East.

The way that the Arab uprisings devolved into violence — via a coup in Egypt that was tolerated by the West, a Western intervention in Libya that topped a tyrant but failed to establish a new government, and a civil war in Syria that the West made little effort to halt — sapped faith within Turkey's government that it shared political goals and strategies with its long-time Western allies. Turkey supported some of the Arab Spring movements that were violently stamped out, a reactionary backlash that the West tolerated.⁶ In response, Ankara looked for new international alignments that could provide an alternative political orientation. Most notably, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly suggested that Turkey might join the Russian and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes the countries of Central Asia. To many analysts, Turkey's bid to join the Organization seemed linked to a broader political shift in Turkish foreign policy, away from the West and also away from liberal politics more generally.⁷ In that sense, too, many people believed, Russia and Turkey were converging.

⁵ Ziya Onis, "Between Europeanization and Euro-asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey During the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 1 (2009): 11-17, <https://tr.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/ziyaonis.pdf>; Ziya Sil and Katzenstein, *Beyond Paradigms*, 212; Onis, "Contesting for Turkey's Political 'Centre': Domestic Politics, Identity Conflicts and the Controversy over EU Membership," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 18, no. 3 (2010): 364-368; Ziya Onis, "Multiple Faces of the 'New' Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 1 (2011): 53-54, http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight-turkey_vol_13_no_1_2011_onis.pdf.

⁶ Ziya Onis, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest," *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012): 49-55, http://fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/evnts/media/insight_turkey_vol_14_no_3_2012_onis.pdf.

⁷ Andrew Finkel, "Eastern Promises," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2013, <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/29/turkey-turns-away-from-europe-toward-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization>; Emre Ersen, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A New Alternative for Turkish Foreign Policy?" *Middle East Institute*, October 18, 2013, <http://www.mei.edu/content/shanghai-cooperation-organization-new-alternative-turkish-foreign-policy>.

4. War in Syria

Dreams of a Russia-Turkey entente — dreams that were once especially popular in Moscow, but also in Ankara — were shattered amid the wreckage of the Syrian War. Moscow and Ankara had papered over political differences during the previous two decades, neither side wanting to disrupt a pragmatic and profitable relationship. But Syria tore apart the Russian-Turkish friendship. When Turkey shot down the Russian jet in November 2015, Putin declared it betrayal. “Our servicemen are engaged in a heroic fight against terrorism, not sparing themselves or their own lives,” Putin said. “Today’s loss is a result of a stab in the back delivered by terrorists’ accomplices.”⁸

Turkey has long believed that it deserves a special say in Syrian affairs.⁹ The two countries’ politics have been interlinked for decades. During the 1990s, Ankara threatened to invade Syria in retaliation for Damascus’s support for the PKK. After Syria ejected the PKK, relations improved. In the years before Syria’s civil war began, relations between Ankara and Damascus had warmed considerably. The two countries held joint cabinet meetings, and trade boomed.

Yet the outbreak of protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring, ruined relations between the two countries. Turkey enthusiastically supported the protests against the Arab World’s autocrats, in large part because the AK Party saw the protestors’ struggle as a replica of its own rise to power. Arab protesters sought to topple entrenched authoritarian systems, doing so in part by mobilizing religiously devout sections of the population that opposed their governments’ rigid secularist tendencies. Many in the AK Party saw this as similar to their own struggle against Turkey’s secularist elite. When the Syrian government violently cracked down on protestors — largely but not only Sunni Arabs, many of whom had links with the Muslim Brotherhood — Turkey not only disagreed vehemently with the policy, Erdogan interpreted it as a personal insult.¹⁰

As anti-government protests morphed into civil war, Turkey’s position hardened. Assad must go, Ankara declared, and it began supporting anti-government rebel groups to topple Assad.¹¹ For two years, it appeared as though Ankara’s strategy might be working, albeit slowly. But the rise of ISIS thwarted Turkey’s strategy. Suddenly the West had an opponent that it perceived as far more threatening than Assad. Washington and its European allies struggled to craft a policy that neither relied on Assad — who, most Western governments agreed, should step down — nor tolerated the expansion of ISIS.

⁸ Vladimir Putin, meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan, November 24, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/president-putins-statement-on-russian-jet-fighter-shot-down-by-turkey-meeting-with-king-abdullah-ii-of-jordan/5491210>.

⁹ F. Stephen Larrabee, “Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2007): 109.

¹⁰ Nursin Atesoglu Guney, “A New Challenge for Turkey: Civil War in Syria,” *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 4 (2013): 53-57, http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/05_atesoglu_3_w.pdf; Raymond Hinnebusch, “Back to Enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Syrian Uprising,” *Journal of German Orient Institute* (2015): 14-15, https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10023/6068/Turkey_Syria_Relations_Orient_I_2015_Hinnebusch_1_pdf?sequence=1.

¹¹ Jonathan Burch, “Turkish PM Calls on Syria’s Assad to Quit,” *Reuters*, November 22, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-syria-idUSTRE7AL0WJ20111122>.

The West's solution was the Kurds — specifically the Kurdish militias, called the YPG, who seized control of predominantly Kurdish portions of northern Syria early in the conflict.¹² The Syrian government tolerated the Kurds' rising influence, seeing them as a tool that could be used to split Assad's opponents. The West perceived the Kurds as the only force capable of halting the spread of ISIS, given that the success of the Sunni Arab militias backed by Turkey and the Gulf States appeared to have stalled.

To Turkey, an expansion of YPG influence in Syria was not an opportunity, but a dire threat. In Ankara's eyes, the YPG militias were barely distinguishable from the PKK fighters guilty of a decades-long reign of terror across Turkey. Available evidence suggests that Ankara's claims of close connections between Turkey-based PKK terrorists and the YPG militias in Syria are broadly accurate. Turkey's government, therefore, has consistently tried to marginalize the influence of the YPG and prevent it from expanding its territorial reach in Syria. If the choice is between ISIS and the YPG, Ankara argues, the Kurdish terrorist threat is more pressing.¹³

In September 2014, ISIS laid siege to the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobani, which sits on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey. Ankara refused to open the border to resupply the Kurdish militias, even as the United States conducted airstrikes on ISIS to support the YPG. The Kobani siege marked an important turning point, highlighting the divergence between Turkey's goals in Syria and those of its Western partners, and underscoring the seriousness with which Ankara viewed the YPG threat. The collapse of a ceasefire within Turkey between the government and the PKK in mid-2015, which was driven in part by Kurdish anger over Ankara's actions during the Kobani siege, further inflamed relations between Turkey and Kurdish groups on both sides of the border.¹⁴

Despite Turkey's discomfort, however, Syria's Kurdish groups began seizing substantial territory, primarily from ISIS, but also from other groups. At the same time, however, Turkish-backed Sunni Arab militias began to regain momentum in mid-2015. By the end of 2015, some analysts believed that rebel gains threatened the viability of the Syrian government.¹⁵ The risk that the Assad government would collapse was a major factor in Russia's decision to deploy its air force to Syria and to begin airstrikes on rebel forces near the cities of Homs and Hama. Soon, Russia had deployed additional forces in Syria and scaled-up its airstrikes, supporting Syrian government forces as they launched an offensive against rebel groups in the northwest corner of the country.

¹² Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, "Turkey Uneasy as U.S. Support of Syrian Kurds Grows," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/world/middleeast/turkey-uneasy-as-us-support-of-syrian-kurds-grows.html>.

¹³ Erdogan has repeatedly called Syrian Kurdish fighters a "terrorist organization" and has condemned the West (specifically the US) for providing weapons that he claims have been "used against civilians and caused their deaths." See Greg Botelho, "Turkish Leader: U.S. Responsible for 'Sea of Blood' for Supporting Syrian Kurds," *CNN*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/10/middleeast/turkey-erdogan-criticizes-us>; Ece Toksabay, "Turkey Says Obama Shares Syria Concerns with Erdogan, Affirms Support," *Reuters*, February 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-usa-idUSKCN0VSOQ7>.

¹⁴ Rukmini Callimachi, "Inside Syria: Kurds Roll Back ISIS, but Alliances are Strained," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-islamic-state-kurdish-militia-ypg.html>; David Gardner, "Turkey: The High Price of Erdogan's Power Grab," *Financial Times*, September 22, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ec792ffc-5de2-11e5-a28b-50226830d644.html>.

¹⁵ Erika Solomon, Alex Barker, Sam Jones, and Kathrin Hille, "Russian Intervention in Syria Points to Bashar al-Assad's Weakness," *Financial Times*, September 23, 2015, <https://next.ft.com/content/993251e4-620a-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2>.

What are Russia's aims in Syria? One is simple: to bolster the government of Bashar al-Assad, which the Kremlin wants to see defended from what it perceives as an illegitimate attempt at regime change, funded by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the West. Russia perceives the principle — that governments should not be overthrown, whatever their sins — as sacrosanct in international law. Second, Russia has a historic relationship with the Syrian army as well as a longstanding military facility in Tartus. These were probably not primary drivers of Russia's decision to intervene, but they certainly facilitated that choice. Finally, in Syria, the Kremlin succeeded in regaining momentum in international affairs. After a year of being punished for its role in Ukraine, Russia saw in Syria a playing field that it could reshape to its advantage, while leaving Western policy disoriented. So far, in this goal, the Kremlin succeeded.

Russia has been open about its aims in Syria. Immediately before its intervention began, Putin visited New York and delivered a speech to the UN General Assembly. He touched on two main themes: the struggle against terrorism and the need to support what Russia sees as Syria's legitimate government. "Russia has always been firm and consistent in opposing terrorism in all its forms," Putin declared to the United Nations. "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its Armed Forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face-to-face." The goal of Russian policy was "to restore the statehood where it has been destroyed, to strengthen the government institutions where they still exist or are being reestablished, to provide comprehensive assistance...to countries in a difficult situation." This was the opposite of the aims of Western and other Arab countries, which were trying to topple Assad. But Putin was firm: "I believe it is of the utmost importance to... provide comprehensive assistance to the legitimate government of Syria."¹⁶

Russia's intervention reshaped the Syrian War — and none of the players lost more influence than Turkey. For one thing, the deployment of Russian aircraft in northern Syria all but eliminated any chance of a US-Turkish no fly zone in the region. The Obama Administration had already repeatedly turned down Turkish requests for such a zone, though some people in Washington favored such an approach.¹⁷ Now, though, the cost of a no fly zone was drastically higher, because of the risk that it would spark a broader conflict with Russia. Second, Russian intervention strengthened Assad and weakened Turkish-backed rebels in the crucial battleground of northwestern Syria, near the cities of Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo, an area in which Turkey had sought to build up a beachhead of resistance against Assad.¹⁸

¹⁶ Vladimir Putin, speech to the United Nations General Assembly, September 28, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/transcript-putin-speech-united-nations-377586>.

¹⁷ Mark Mazzetti and Peter Baker, "U.S. is Debating Ways to Shield Syrian Civilians," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/world/middleeast/us-considering-ways-to-shield-syrian-civilians.html>; John McCain, interview with Charlie Rose, October 19, 2015, <https://charlierose.com/videos/23578>.

¹⁸ Anne Barnard, "Syrian Forces Press Aleppo, Sending Thousands Fleeing," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/world/middleeast/syria-aleppo.html>.

Turkey tried to push back against Russian encroachment on what Ankara saw as its sphere of influence in northwestern Syria. On November 24, Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 that had flown a mile into Turkish airspace for less than a minute. This was far from the first Russian jet to violate Turkish airspace. Several others had done so earlier in the year, and Turkish and NATO officials both believed these flights were a deliberate provocation. After Russia's intervention, Turkey had more reason than ever to strike back — and to hope that a hard hit would deter the Russians from pressing too close to Turkey's borders.

The shooting down of its plane enraged Russia, which slapped an array of painful economic sanctions on Turkey.¹⁹ But the downing of the Russian jet failed to change the Kremlin's policies in Syria. If anything, Russian bombing of Turkish-backed rebel groups intensified. By January 2016, Turkish-backed rebels were retreating in front of Assad's advances, even as Syrian government forces began to encircle Aleppo, Syria's second biggest city and a hotbed of Turkish-supported resistance.

Without Russian aid — and air support — the Syrian government's advances in late 2015 and early 2016 would not have been possible. For that alone, Turkey bitterly protested the Kremlin's role in the conflict. Even more concerning, in Ankara's view, was Russian coordination with the YPG Kurdish militias. The Kremlin has a long history, dating back to the 19th century, of coordinating with Kurdish rebels to undermine Turkey's position, and Russia's entry to the Syrian war reignited interest in the Kurds.²⁰ On February 10, 2016, the Syrian Kurds opened a representative office in Moscow.²¹

Yet most worrying, from Ankara's perspective, was the battlefield in northern Syria. The YPG currently controls two non-contiguous chunks of Syrian territory along Turkey's border. Between the two YPG territories is a large zone run by ISIS, and a tiny sliver north of Aleppo controlled by Turkish-backed rebels. Turkey's nightmare scenario is the YPG seizing from the rebels the territory above Aleppo, which Ankara fears could form the nucleus of a semi-independent Syrian Kurdish state straddling Turkey's southern border. Indeed, the YPG has taken advantage of the Russian-backed Syrian government offensive to seize territory from the rebels. Turkey has launched artillery strikes on YPG positions to ensure they do not cut off Turkish routes toward Aleppo, but the matter remains unresolved. It looks likely to be settled on the battlefield.

¹⁹ According to economists at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Russia's sanctions on Turkey may reduce GDP growth in 2016 by around 0.3-0.7 percentage points. See: Idil Bilgic-Alpaslan, Bojan Markovic, Peter Tabak, and Emir Zildzovic, "Economic Implications of Russia's Sanctions Against Turkey," *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, December 7, 2015, <http://www.ebrd.com/news/2015/economic-implications-of-russias-sanctions-against-turkey.html>.

²⁰ Michael Reynolds, "Abdürrezzak Bedirhan: Ottoman Kurd and Russophile in the Twilight of Empire," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* vol. 12, no. 2 (spring 2011): 411-50.

²¹ Damien Sharkov, "Syrian Kurds Open Office in Moscow, as Russia-Turkey Row Continues," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/syrian-kurds-open-office-moscow-russia-turkey-row-continues-425177>.

5. Broader Risks

Syria is the most acute zone of Russian-Turkish disagreement, but it is not the only one. The long frontier between the Russian and Turkish worlds bequeathed a series of conflicts among their successor states. Many of these disputes were reanimated when the Soviet Union dissolved. When relations between Ankara and Moscow are constructive, as they have been for most of the past quarter century, each country's leaders work to ensure that these flash points remain localized. When relations sour, however, both countries find reason to fan the flames of ancient enmities. Small conflicts become tests of strength. The risk of escalation increases. The longer Russian-Turkish relations remain strained, the more likely a regional dispute draws in the two powers. Even beyond the precarious balance in the Levant, Russia and Turkey have no lack of potential disputes. Two stand out: the Caucasus and the Black Sea.

a. The Caucasus

The territories straddling the Caucasus mountains have long been a zone of conflict between the Russian and Turkish (and Persian) empires. During the Soviet period, harsh controls kept out Turkish influence and — more importantly — limited clashes between the regions' many ethnic groups. But the region is beset with conflicts that are only partially frozen. In each of the region's pressure zones, Turkey and Russia sponsor opposing sides.

Azerbaijan and Armenia, for example, have been fighting over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A ceasefire is currently in place, though it is regularly violated. Recent fighting has been the most intense in two decades.²² Azeris, who have deep cultural ties to Turkey and whose language is mutually intelligible with Turkish, count on Ankara for diplomatic support and as a corridor for Azerbaijani oil and gas as it heads westward to European markets. In solidarity with Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia, Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993, and it has not been reopened since.

Armenia, meanwhile, is far weaker than its gas-rich rival, and thus relies heavily on Russian arms and money to survive. Russia plays both sides, maintaining cordial relations with Baku even as it arms Armenia. The Kremlin uses the Karabakh conflict to ensure that both Armenia and Azerbaijan remain oriented, at least in part, toward Russia. If large scale conflict were to break out, however, Armenia would struggle to survive without significant help from Moscow. Azerbaijan would expect support from Ankara, and powerful nationalist lobbies would place pressure on the Turkish government to provide such help. Moscow and Ankara could thus easily find themselves again backing opposing sides of a proxy war. After the clashes this spring between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Erdogan declared: "We pray our Azerbaijani brothers will prevail in these clashes with the least casualties...We will support Azerbaijan to the end."²³

²² Neil MacFarquhar, "Azerbaijan Claims to Halt Violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, but Warns Armenia," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/04/world/europe/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh-conflict.html>.

²³ Recep Tayyip Erdogan, answer to reporter's question at opening ceremony of Turkish-American Culture and Civilization Center, April 2, 2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/41388/turkey-will-support-azerbaijan-to-the-end.html>.

b. The Black Sea

For the first time since the Soviet era, the Black Sea is again a site of military confrontation. After 1991, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was divided between Russia and Ukraine, and both countries slashed spending on their navies, which rusted away in dilapidated ports. By the late 1990s, NATO navies were all but unchallenged. No longer. The annexation of Crimea has changed the military balance. For one thing, it showed how the investment that Russia poured into its military, beginning in the mid-2000s, had paid off. The Crimean operation was daring and effective. At the same time, Russia has doubled down on its Black Sea investments since the war, most notably by adding to its armaments in Crimea.²⁴

Even after the rapprochement with Russia, Ankara is looking nervously northward, realizing that, after two decades of viewing other Black Sea countries primarily as trade partners, it now has security concerns, too. NATO officials now express worries that Russia's military buildup provides Moscow the ability to deny NATO forces access to parts of the Black Sea.²⁵ Turkey, meanwhile, is coming to terms with the fact that it now faces a serious Russian military force to its north in addition to its south and east.

²⁴ Stephen J. Blank, "Imperial Ambitions: Russia's Military Buildup," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (2015): <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/imperial-ambitions-russia%E2%80%99s-military-buildup>.

²⁵ Foreign Ministers of NATO-Ukraine Commission, joint statement, May 13, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_119425.htm.

6. Russian Policy Options

Each of the three main parties analyzed here face decisions about what strategy to adopt going forward. The choices they make will determine the balance of conflict and cooperation. For Russia, the choices are most straightforward, and the Kremlin will probably find the decision an easy one to make. For Turkey and the West, by contrast, the strategic choices are more difficult. On top of that, the priorities of Turkish and other NATO policy makers may change as domestic politics shifts. Russian foreign policy, by contrast, is far less dependent on domestic political changes.

Option 1: Test Turkey and NATO

Moscow could push to aggressively test Turkey's ties with the rest of NATO by provoking another incident that forces that alliance to choose between solidarity with Ankara and 'deconfliction' with Russia. Many analysts feared that this was Russia's strategy in the aftermath of Turkey's decision to shoot down the Russian jet in November 2015. Now, after the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey, the Kremlin is hoping that disagreements between Ankara and other NATO countries on other issues will reduce NATO's ability to operate in the Black Sea and other regions.

Option 2: Pull back from Syria

A second option available to Russian leaders is to pull back from its new forward position in the Middle East. Such a move would certainly reduce tensions with Turkey and other NATO members, but it looks unlikely at this point. Most officials in Moscow see the Syrian War as a success. The costs of staying put are low, most Russians believe, and the benefits are clear. There is no guarantee that Assad's government could survive a Russian pull out, nor that the Islamist militant groups would not expand. So there is little likelihood that Moscow will adopt such a strategy unless its calculation of costs and benefits changes drastically.

Option 3: Defend the new status quo

The third strategy available to Russia is to maintain the new status quo, guaranteeing the Assad system's survival, retaining its new military position in Syria, and continuing to chip away at the territory currently held by various rebel groups and by ISIS. Such a policy could include additional advances around Aleppo, where Russian-backed Syrian forces scored significant victories against Turkish-backed rebels in late 2015 and early 2016. So long as the costs of such a policy remain low, there is little reason to abandon what Moscow sees as a successful policy course.

7. Turkish Policy Options

How can Turkey respond to Russia's expanding influence? Ankara has three basic policy options. First, it could recognize Russia's new power and seek a new *modus vivendi* that accommodates the Kremlin's expansive desires. Second, Ankara could try to push Russia back from Turkey's borders. Third, Turkey could accept the reality of the standoff with Russia, but focus on shoring up its defenses and those of its allies.

Option 1: Step back as Russia steps forward

In the aftermath both of the coup attempt in July and Erdogan's visit to Russia in August, some analysts have suggested that Turkey is preparing to cede its interests in Syria, acknowledging Russia's predominant role in that country in exchange for more constructive relations with the Kremlin. Now a month after the rapprochement was announced, it is clear that the improvement of ties has not yet created a shared understanding of how the two countries should approach Syria. It is possible to envision scenarios in which Ankara might opt to cut a deal with Russia that recognized Moscow's new influence in Syria and the Black Sea in exchange for guarantees about the Syrian Kurds and other issues important to Ankara. Consider, for example, Ankara's options if Russia and Assad continue to stamp out the Turkish-backed rebels near Aleppo, and succeed in stabilizing the Western half of Syria. Turkey might conclude that its influence is extinguished and that its best option is to seek an agreement with Moscow that marginalizes the Kurds and prevents an expansion of the power of Syrian Kurdish militias. But the failure of Russian-backed Syrian government forces to win a decisive victory in Aleppo will encourage those in Turkey who want to continue supporting anti-Assad militia groups.

Any attempt to reach a new *modus vivendi* with Russia in Syria would drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies. NATO would view Turkish recognition of an expanded Russian sphere of influence as a further decline in alliance cohesion. Turkey's refusal to join Western sanctions on Russia in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war in Ukraine has already left many in the West wondering where Turkey's priorities lay.²⁶

In Ankara's eyes, the benefits of rapprochement with Russia are obvious, though the difficulties of reaching an agreement are also clear. A deal with Russia to demarcate spheres of influence in Syria might give Turkey greater leeway to put pressure on Syria's Kurdish groups, ensuring that Syria does not become an example for Turkish Kurds seeking independence. Such a strategy would frustrate Ankara's NATO allies, but by defusing conflict with Russia, it would reduce the immediate importance of NATO in Turkish foreign policy.

²⁶ When asked about Ankara's improving economic relations with Moscow while Western sanctions are imposed on Russia, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed his desire to "see as many countries as possible to be a part of this... or to support all sanctions" (Press conference, December 1, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_115313.htm).

Option 2: Confront Russia by raising the stakes

A second potential Turkish strategy would seek to push Russia away from Turkey's borders, returning to the status-quo of the early days of the Syrian Civil War. Regular threats from Erdogan, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, and others that Turkey is prepared to invade Syria if necessary indicate how seriously Ankara takes Russia's encroachment.²⁷ Current discussion about joint action between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and potentially other Gulf States demonstrates that Erdogan is not the only regional leader who would be pleased to see Russia ousted from Syria altogether.

A strategy of more aggressively pushing back against Russia in Syria entails serious risks. Faced with rising costs, Russia might scale back its foreign policy aims. But it might instead choose to up the ante, doubling down on its bets in Syria and elsewhere, doubting that Turkey would be willing to take the necessary risks to respond. That appears to have been Russia's strategy so far, and in Syria it has worked. The Kremlin deployed its military not far from Turkey's border, testing Ankara's willingness to respond. Russian fighters repeatedly violated Turkish airspace, daring Turkey to shoot them down. After Turkey shot down the SU-24, Russian planes were soon violating Turkish airspace yet again, taunting Ankara to shoot down a second Russian fighter.²⁸ Ankara has thus far declined to do so.

Option 3: Coordinating means and ends with NATO alliances

The third potential Turkish response is an armed standoff. Turkey is unlikely to recognize the types of privileges in Syria that Russia is seeking to carve out by force. So long as Russia devotes significant resources to its foreign policy, the Kremlin is likely to achieve some of its goals, including playing a large role in Syria and in its neighbors' politics.

Given such a landscape, Turkey may choose a strategy not unlike containment during the Cold War era: bolster its defenses, seek to prevent any further Russian expansion, but avoid trying to overturn Russian advances by military means. Such a strategy would look like what Europe and the United States have executed in Ukraine since 2014. Western pushback against Russia's expansion into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine has been in the form of diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions, not via military tools.

Like the West's strategy in Ukraine, a similar Turkish strategy vis-à-vis Russia would achieve only some of Ankara's short-term aims. But in contrast to a more confrontational strategy, it would cost far less and be easier to sustain. Such a strategy would likely begin by refocusing Ankara's aims in Syria away from the broader political situation and toward achieving a modus vivendi with the Syrian Kurds that would satisfy Turkish security concerns. Such a strategy would likely require Turkey's recognition, painful though it would be, that it will play a lesser role in shaping Syrian politics.

²⁷ Turkey's Foreign Minister has said that "a ground operation [in Syria] is necessary," Tulay Karadeniz, Ece Toksabay, and Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey Seeks Allies' Support for Ground Operations as Syria War Nears Border," *Reuters*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKCN0VP0WO>.

²⁸ Emre Peker, "Turkey Says Russia Violated Its Airspace Again," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-says-russia-violated-its-airspace-again-1454171970>.

While restraining Turkey's ambitions in Syria, such a strategy would entail greater investment in defense and diplomacy. In Syria, for example, Turkey set large goals and failed to achieve them. Unlike Russia, for example, Turkey never felt comfortable intervening with its own military in the Syrian War. Even more important, Turkish diplomacy has lagged behind. The lofty aims of Ahmet Davutoglu's "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy were not realized.²⁹ Instead, problems have multiplied, so that Turkey struggles to build coalitions to achieve its interests. A strategy which sought to focus on Ankara's most achievable goals, and which coordinated more effectively with allies, might well be more effective.

²⁹ Onis, "Turkey and the Arab Spring," 60-61.

8. Strategic Options for Turkey's NATO Allies

The main question faced by Turkey and Russia is to what extent to put resources behind foreign policy aims. In each country, the main axis of foreign policy debate is less about aims, and more about making foreign policy correspond with the amount of resources — military, economic, diplomatic — that are being devoted to a given problem. For Turkey's NATO allies, however, that debate is less important, though still present. More significant is the question of prioritization. Which goals are most important in Syria, and which are less important? How should policy in Syria relate to policy elsewhere in the region? These are the key strategic questions facing Turkey's Western allies.

Option 1: Decrease reliance on Syria's Kurds

The most successful fighting forces against ISIS have been Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq and Northern Syria. From the perspective of the United States and other Western powers, there is little difference between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds. Militias in both territories have been successful in taking territory from ISIS. Unlike other Syrian rebel groups, there is less risk that funds and weapons funneled to Kurds will end up supporting terrorist attacks in the West. Given the priority the West has placed on fighting ISIS, and the limited military force that Western powers are willing to commit, there are few options besides bolstering the Kurds. For Ankara, however, the expansion of Syrian Kurdish autonomy and power represents a direct threat. If the West were to decide to cut back its reliance in Syrian Kurds, either because it was downgrading the prioritization of fighting ISIS, devoting more of its own resources to that fight, or because it decided to change course and back the Assad government as a means of countering ISIS, friction in the relationship between Ankara and other NATO powers would be sharply reduced. For now, however, the United States in particular looks to be expanding support for the Kurds rather than reducing it.

Option 2: Reassure Turkey

A second strategic option, which could correspond with the first, is to reassure Turkey and make it feel more secure. Such a policy could address Turkish security concerns, as well as President Erdogan personally. Some analysts interpreted the European Union's refugee deal with Turkey as an implicit guarantee to Erdogan that Germany would not oppose him despite disagreements over Turkish domestic developments. An alternative, and less controversial, means of reassuring Turkey would be to focus on the country's broader security concerns. Current proposals to build up NATO's strength in the Black Sea, in response to Russia's growing presence there, is one proposal that might underscore the usefulness of NATO to Turkey. Even more significant would be efforts to help end the current wave of PKK bombings, though there is little evidence that either the PKK or the Turkish government is ready for a new ceasefire.

9. Conclusion: Possible Paths Forward

Many drivers of the Syrian conflict, which have pushed Russia and Turkey toward confrontation in the past, are unlikely to disappear soon. The Kremlin's desire to preserve what it perceives as the legitimate government of Syria, for example, is a policy with broad support in Moscow. So, too, is the Kremlin's overall policy of playing a larger role in regional affairs, even at the cost of military action.³⁰ On the Turkish side, too, the realities of geography mean that Turkey will care deeply about how the Syrian War is resolved. So, too, the Kurdish question will shape Turkey's relations with its southern neighbors, and drive Ankara's policy in Syria. One can hope for a resolution of the conflict between Turkey and its Kurds, but it would not be wise to bet on it.

The Western powers also face difficult trade-offs. The uncomfortable reality is that Russia will continue to set the tempo in Syria because it is far more willing than either Turkey or the Western powers to deploy resources and take on risk. The past year has demonstrated that Putin's appetite for risk is far higher than that of Turkey's NATO allies. The United States is focused less on pushing back against Russian support for the Assad government, and more on 'deconflicting' with Russia — that is, ensuring that US planes bombing ISIS do not clash with Russian planes striking US and Turkish-backed rebel groups.³¹

The absurdity of this situation, in which the West works with Russia to ensure that the Kremlin faces no distractions as it attacks Western-backed militias in Syria, has been lost on no one. But it is the inevitable result of a basic fact of the Syrian conflict: Russia's risk tolerance is far higher than the West's. That factor is unlikely to change soon. No one in Europe or the United States wants to fight a war over Syria. Whenever Putin raises the stakes, the West steps back and tries to give Russia an 'off-ramp' toward a negotiating table. If the Kremlin decides instead to simply take what it wants, so be it.

The United States, in particular, faces a contradictory set of trade-offs. Washington has been the most vigorous supporter of Syria's Kurds, seeing them as the most credible force against ISIS. Yet the more victories Syria's Kurds have against ISIS, the less secure Turkey feels. The more successful Washington is at using Syrian Kurds to degrade ISIS, the more friction there will be in US-Turkey relations. So long as Washington continues to call for Assad to step aside, and so long as no Western power remains willing to back their goals in Syria with military force, there is no obvious way to avoid tension with Turkey. At the very least, though, Washington could be more sensitive to Turkey's concerns. Too many of Turkey's NATO allies fail to recognize that Syria's Kurds represent a deeply problematic partner, and too many dismiss Turkey's security concerns in Syria. At the very least, a clearer understanding on both sides of the goals and strategies that motivate Turkey and its NATO allies would help reduce friction in the relationship.

³⁰ Levada Center, National survey, September 18-21, 2015, N=1600, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/syria-0>.

³¹ Helene Cooper, "A Semantic Downgrade for U.S.-Russian Talks About Operations in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/world/middleeast/a-semantic-downgrade-for-us-russian-talks-about-operations-in-syria.html>.

The complicated knot of Syrian militias and outside powers that have fueled Syria's civil war has proven thus far impossible to untangle. The status of Syria's Kurds looks likely to remain a key sticking point in relations between Ankara and Washington. In the long run, this disagreement is likely to present more enduring problems than both sides' unhappiness with the response to the failed coup. Yet whatever disagreements Turkey has with Washington over Syria, its disputes with Russia are no less complicated. The status of Assad in particular — whether he should resign immediately or after a stipulated period of time — seems less important than the question of whether Turkey's and Russia's perceived interests in northern Syria and around the Aleppo region are compatible. Thus far the answer has been no. Unless that changes, the Russian-Turkish rapprochement is likely to be more about messaging than about substance.

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