



## **What Are the Implications of the Russian-Turkish Rapprochement?**

**Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos**

BESA Center Online Debate No. 5, January 21, 2018

**Q: In the aftermath of the failed coup d'état of July 2016, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is embarking on an attempt to improve Ankara's relations with non-Western countries to avoid international isolation. The Russian-Turkish rapprochement is a characteristic example. While the EU and the US criticize Erdoğan for his domestic and foreign policy choices, he regularly meets with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to discuss new patterns of cooperation. BESA join the debate by asking the experts: What are the implications of the Russian-Turkish rapprochement?**

**Respondents: Jonathan Adelman, Sergei Markedonov, David Satter, Burak Bekdil, Mesun Casin, Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta**



**Jonathan Adelman, Professor at Josef Korbel School of International Studies,  
University of Denver, Denver**

A Russian-Turkish alliance would be quite powerful in the Middle East, but the likelihood of such an alliance being created is low and its impact quite limited. Why?

There are a number of factors restraining the creation of such an alliance. Erdoğan and Putin are in their mid-60s and have been in power a long time (14 and 17 years, respectively). Erdoğan in particular is on the downside with a mere 51% of the vote in the last election, having lost the three biggest cities in Turkey and the youth vote. For Putin, the election next year for a six year term is probably the end.

Putin is trying to revive traditional Russian history, but over several centuries, the Russians fought 12 wars with Ottoman Turkey. With religion important these days, Russian Orthodox Christianity does not go well with Turkey's strict Islam. Russia has always been and still is authoritarian after 1,000 years while Turkey, starting with Kemal Atatürk, has moved towards a quasi-democratic system.

Russia has a weak economy while Turkey is \$3,000 GDP/per capita ahead of Russia. Most of all, Turkey would risk giving up any hopes to join the EU some day and would forever alienate the West by leaving NATO. Thus, the likely result of the Russian-Turkey exchanges is almost bound to be limited and very specific.



**Sergey Markedonov, Associate Professor at Russian State University for the Humanities, expert at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund**

The pendulum of Russian-Turkish relations is once again on the upswing. Both Ankara and Moscow are demonstrating a willingness to cooperate in resolving the Syrian conflict. They are also interested in boosting their economic ties, including such strategic areas as nuclear energy. Russia and Turkey pretend to play a significant role in Eurasia in diminishing the US, but the recent normalization of relations between Moscow and Ankara does not necessarily mean the two will form a new alliance.

Russian-Turkish relations in the post-Cold War era have a long history of ups and downs. In the 1990s as well as in 2015-16, Russian and Turkish diplomats gained a lot of experience in "crisis management" in relation to each other. For many years, the development and strengthening of bilateral trade and business covered up geopolitical differences on the South Caucasus, Cyprus, and the Middle East. When

those differences emerged, however, both Moscow and Ankara realized that neither of them stood to gain from them. This allowed them to minimize confrontation and look for pragmatic solutions.

Nevertheless, despite the warming of relations, it would be naïve to think that new disagreements will not appear. No matter how solid the energy contracts may be or how many agreements are signed, they will not eliminate the differences that still exist between Russia and Turkey on Nagorno-Karabakh, Crimea, and Syria. But a modus vivendi between these two Eurasian powers should be viewed as an important step towards resolving the chaos of the Middle East and improving the international political system as a whole.



**David Satter, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute and Fellow of the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Washington, DC**

The seeming Russian-Turkish rapprochement should not be seen as anything permanent. In reality, Russia does not have strategic interests in the Middle East and, in the broader sense, no real reason to be there. Russia's war in Syria, like its wars in Chechnya, was fought in order to distract the Russian population from internal misrule and to rally support for the regime. If the internal political needs of the regime change, so will its actions abroad.

For the time being, Russia and Turkey are working together to end the conflict in Syria but they are doing so for different reasons. In the case of Russia, the object is to strengthen the hold on power of the Putin regime. In the case of Turkey, the goals are an end to the threat of Kurdish separatism, leadership in the Sunni world, and regime stability in Turkey. For the moment, the two countries are working together to reduce the fighting. But this is not the same as an approach based on common values and a shared strategic vision. The first signs of discord have already been registered with the recent denunciation by Turkish President Erdoğan of Syrian President Assad, who is strongly supported by Russia, as a "terrorist." Further cracks in the seemingly newly friendly Russian-Turkish relationship can be expected in the near future.



**Burak Bekdil, Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum**

What appears like a Turkish shift towards a Russian-led Eurasian axis is in fact a fragile tactical alliance, not an emerging strategic partnership. It is based on a multitude of geostrategic layers: 1) President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ideological discomfort with the West and its democratic culture/institutions is a natural push for Turkey into Russia's sphere of influence, especially in Syria, highlighting what looks like an undemocratic likemindedness; 2) the bitter lessons Erdoğan took from Russia's punishing economic sanctions on Turkey after Turkey shot down a Russian military jet in November 2015, coupled with Turkey's historic fear of Soviet/Russian aggression; 3) Erdoğan's calculation to use the Russian bloc as a bargaining chip in his troubled dealings with the Western bloc; and 4) Erdoğan's belief in the coming fall of the West and the rise of the East.

Despite all this, the tactical alliance remains fragile for a number of reasons. First, Russia's ambiguous position on a future "Kurdish belt" in northern Syria touches raw nerves in Ankara, as any Kurdish entity to Turkey's south remains a top security threat for Erdoğan and his policymakers. Second, Turkey's support for the Russian-Iranian bloc will be tentative given Erdoğan's deep pro-Sunni ideology: a Shiite expansion in its south is the second-worst security threat for Ankara. Third, President Vladimir Putin views Erdoğan as a useful policy tool, not as an ally. To Moscow, Erdoğan is an untrustworthy Islamist and a potential troublemaker. Likewise, most senior Turkish diplomats view Russia with deep suspicion, either because they favor a Turkish future aligned with the West or because they believe Russia will eventually betray Turkish interests after it has taken advantage of its services.



**Mesut Casin, Professor at İstinye University, Istanbul**

On the one hand, Turkey, without cutting ties with the NATO alliance and the West, is trying to improve energy and economic cooperation with Russia. And on the other, by purchasing S-400 missiles, it is supporting critical air defense capability with Moscow. Both countries are trying hard not to antagonize one other over sensitive subjects.

Despite President Trump's promises about stopping weapons assistance to the PYD terrorist organization in Syria, recent weapons shipments by the Pentagon – as well as the Americans' refusal to extradite Gülen – have given rise to a deep distrust of the US among the Turkish public. In Ankara, Commander of CENTCOM Gen. J. Votel, Commander of US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. C. Scaparrotti, and Commander of Turkish Armed Forces Gen. H. Akar have left discussions unresolved on these two serious issues. Thus, the presence of 5,000 CENTCOM soldiers on the Syrian border and the terrorist group PKK's obtaining of their weapons create serious problems between the Turkish and the US armed forces who fought side by side in Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

In this way, the strategic mistakes of the US with regard to Turkey have brought Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran closer with each other in Astana Period<sup>[JL1]</sup>. By preventing the civil war and mass migration in Syria<sup>[JL2]</sup>, Putin and Erdoğan have achieved to place a cornerstone in the history of peace in the Middle East<sup>[JL3]</sup>.

The recognition of Jerusalem by President Trump as the capital city of Israel, which is causing a reaction at the UN level, has opened a new area for Putin and Erdoğan<sup>[JL4]</sup>. From this perspective, the participation of Russia in a relevant Istanbul meeting has increased the Russian effectiveness in the UN and the Orthodox Christian world as well as the sympathy of Palestinian public.<sup>[JL5]</sup> Furthermore, Russia has gained quite strong advantages by gaining permanent naval air bases in Syria. When it comes to its relations with Egypt and Iran, it returned to the Middle East with a much greater power compared to the Cold War times.

In conclusion, in the short and medium term, the charismatic leadership of Putin and Erdoğan may be expected to form a different, sensitive and balanced model in

providing peace and stability of regional power balance in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.



**Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta, President of the Institute of Post-Communist Studies and Terrorism, Miami, Florida and co-writer and editor of articles by JVLV, respectively**

The Russo-Turkish rapprochement is neither a Shakespearean tragedy for NATO nor a huge boon for Putin. Russia's primary interest in Turkey is no longer her centuries-long, geopolitical lust for the Turkish Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Once, they posed Russia's only egress to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea. Today, twenty-first century air force fighters, long-range bombers, medium-range missiles deployed on Russia's Caspian Sea fleet, and the building of Russian air force facilities in Latakia, Syria, have greatly reduced the strategic significance of the Straits.

Moreover, the business of Russia in the Middle East is no longer a geopolitical expansion but a geo-economic one. Turkey is Russia's number two trading partner. Add to that a multitude of planned and already competing pipelines too complex to detail here, an economic lifeline for Russia, as they pass through transfer state Syria to Europe. Also in the works for 2018 is a planned Russo-Turkish, Akkuyu nuclear power station to be built by Russia's nuclear regulatory agency, Rosatom.

Still, all is not rosy with the two emotional and unpredictable leaders, Putin and Erdoğan, who almost went to war in November 2015 over a Russian Su-24 bomber downed by Turkey on the Syrian border. President Erdoğan is also trying to transform Turkey, a unique, secular Muslim country modernized by Atatürk, into an Islamic, fundamentalist state. Unlike Putin, he still supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while Putin, having smashed the Islamists with President Trump's help in Syria, wants to keep that country secular and still worries the jihadist rebels will come back.

Russia also seeks good relations with – and the reduction of sanctions by – America, for whom Turkey has become a tremendous liability. Indeed, both Turkey and America are questioning the viability of Turkey's NATO membership, particularly in light of the Kurdish question. The Kurds, faithful allies of America, seek to carve a

homeland out of Syria, and Trump would like to give them one. Russia seems amenable. That, of course does not sit at all well with Turkey.

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