



The Downing of the Russian Warplane by Turkey

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Since 2011, civil war has beset Syria whilst the spectre of a spillover effect that would directly entangle more countries in the conflict has been haunting the whole region. The recent incident of the downing of the Russian bomber Su-24 by the Turkish Airforce on 24 November 2015¹ that allegedly violated for 17 seconds the Turkish national airspace² has added more fuel in the flames of the war-torn area. The breaking news of the shooting down of the Russian warplane rattled the international community that nervously followed a series of stern pronouncements by both sides.

Russian airstrikes in Syria – since late September 2015³ – have been hailed by the Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad whilst the U.S. has officially castigated Moscow's intervention.⁴ Russian officials announced that the raids have diminished the military capabilities of the Islamic State (IS)⁵ whereas various states claim that these are mostly against Assad's opponents.⁶ Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the sanguinary terrorist attack in Paris, French President Hollande agreed with his Russian counterpart to cooperate more closely in their fight against the Islamic State.⁷ On the other hand, Turkey officially participates in the western coalition against IS by launching airstrikes in Syria since August 2015.⁸ Thus, despite their dispute about the fate of the Syrian President, both countries – Russia and Turkey – ostensibly fight against a common enemy, IS.

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¹ BBC News, "Turkey's downing of Russian warplane – what we know", 1 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

² The details of the alleged violation of the Turkish national airspace are described in detail in the official letter dated 24 November 2015 (2015/10165510, New York) of the Permanent Representative, Mr Halit Cevik to the UN.

³ BBC News, "Syria crisis: Russian airstrikes against Assad enemies", 30 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34399164>.

⁴ The Guardian, "Bashar-al-Assad thanks Putin for Syria strikes as Russia announces US talks", 21 October 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/bashar-al-assad-thanks-russia-vladimir-putin-syria-airstrikes>.

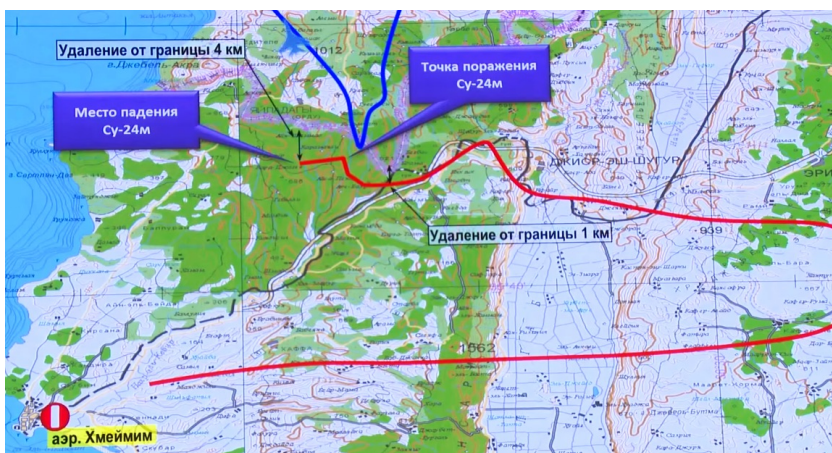
⁵ BBC News, "Syria crisis: Russian airstrikes against Assad enemies", 30 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34399164>.

⁶ DW, "Russia Launches new airstrikes in Syria, denies criticism", 1 October 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/russia-launches-new-airstrikes-in-syria-denies-criticism/a-18752933>, BBC News, "Syria conflict: Russia strikes will fuel extremism", 2 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34419003>.

⁷ Elisabeth Pineau and Dennis Pinchuk, "Holland, Putin agree to work more closely to combat Islamic State in Syria", Reuters, 26 November 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-france-idUSKBN0TF1ZX20151126#guDbfMc2J8pcYjUT.97>.

⁸ Gul Tuysuz and Zeynep Bilginsoy, "Ministry: Turkey joins coalition airstrikes against ISIS in Syria", CNN, 29 August 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/29/europe/turkey-airstrikes/>.

In this context, some basic questions are raised. Why Turkey shot down the Russian warplane? Is their acute disagreement over the succession of the Syrian President strong enough to induce this incident? Or worse, does the violation of the Turkish national airspace per se, occurred in a parallel trajectory to the Turkish borders⁹ – a fact that itself manifested the intentions of the Russian bombers¹⁰ – and only for 17 seconds, in accordance to the Turkish officials, legitimise the Turkish authorities to proceed to such an aggressive military act? In this framework, I have to bring to mind the double standards of the Turkish foreign policy. Admittedly – by Turkish officials as well – the Turkish fighter jets violate almost every day the Greek national airspace over the Aegean Sea; however the Greek air defence has never reacted in the same way as Turks did regarding the Russian bomber.¹¹ Moreover, in 2012 when Syrian air defence shot down a Turkish fighter that violated the Syrian national airspace the then Turkish President Abdullah Gul claimed there was no excuse for such an outrageous act as this type of short-time violations are considered as “routine”(sic).¹²



Russian Federation Ministry of Defence

The paths of the Turkish F-16 and the Russian Su-24 in relation to the Syrian-Turkish border as were officially presented by the respective Ministries of Defence of the Russian Federation and Turkey.



Turkish Ministry of Defence

⁹ Independent, “Turkey releases graphic showing flight path of Russian jet it downed in Syria”, 24 November, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russian-defence-ministry-confirms-turkey-shot-down-its-jet-but-claims-no-air-space-violation-a6746276.html>.

¹⁰ There are some indications in the Airforce world that combined signify the intentions of unknown even foe fighters such as trajectory, velocity (speed) and altitude.

¹¹ Christos Kassimeris, “NATO and the Aegean disputes”, Routledge, *Defense and Security Analysis*, 24:2, (2008), 165-179; ekathimerini.com, “Turkish jets violate Greek airspace”, 1 December 2015, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/203964/article/ekathimerini/news/turkish-jets-violate-greek-air-space>.

¹² The Guardian, “Turkey goes to NATO over plane it says Syria downed in international airspace”, 24 June 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/24/turkey-plane-shot-down-syria>.

Taking into account the aforementioned, the violation of the Turkish airspace seems to be just a pretext, whilst there are other profound reasons for the downing of the Russian warplane. Ankara sought the active involvement of NATO in the Syrian conflict and in her dispute with Russia. NATO's intervention would have strengthened Turkish position to the detriment of Russia and the Assad's regime. Thus, the establishment of a friendly to Turkey Syrian regime would have easily materialised. Furthermore, this development would have possibly legitimised Turkey to actively intervene in Syria with ground troops in order to secure a safe buffer zone in her southern borders. This action would have aimed at a twofold objective: firstly it would have more decisively protected and supported the Turkmen minority that is considered to be ethnically related to Turkey whilst at the same time remains a sworn foe of the Assad regime¹³; concomitantly Ankara would have thwarted Kurdish attempts to gain overall control of the Syrian northern borderland. Turkey's vehement opposition to a likely Kurdish state has to do with the territorial integrity and the national security of the country. Furthermore and in the long-term, Turkey could use the Turkmen minority to legitimise any territorial claims in Syria and a likely annexation of Syrian soil as it did in the case of Alexandretta, that has been annexed by Turkey since 1939.¹⁴ The exploitation of minorities for its own ends and especially for territorial expansion constitutes a common phenomenon of the Turkish foreign policy; the Cyprus case is another striking example. Thus, the downing of the Russian warplane was a conscious act of the Turkish state in order to serve and promote its interests.

Russia did not rise to the bait and refrained from military retaliations. In that way, NATO's active involvement has been instrumentally evaded. President Putin's reaction, albeit a vehement one, proved once again his cold-blooded strategic thinking, meaning the ability to focus on his primary objectives without being distracted as he exactly did during the Crimea crisis.¹⁵ Additionally, Moscow exploited the most the unexpected downing of its bomber. Apart from legitimately reinforcing its contingent in Syria and thus further strengthening its foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, she has deployed the S-400 air defence system, the extremely long range of which covers the airspace of Israel, the Eastern Mediterranean (including Cyprus British airbase at Akrotiri in Cyprus), and large part of southeastern Turkey beyond the Syrian border.¹⁶

However, this is considered as an adverse development for the whole US-coalition against IS. Close coordination and cooperation with Russia is now considered a dire necessity for the avoidance of any type of air-accidents, either collisions or unintentional downing. In fact Turkey, in an attempt to overturn the situation to her benefit, achieved exactly the opposite.

The power game in Syria apart from being territorial and a matter of national security comprises also the control of the regional energy resources along with the southern corridors of energy supply.¹⁷ Turkey aims to be an energy hub¹⁸ whilst Russia strives to protect its hegemonic position. The latter has established a strong foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean for the first time in the recent history, whereas the former has proved unpredictable and unreliable partner for her allies. A number of American strategists re-evaluated in the past the strategic role of Turkey by

¹³ BBC News, "Who are the Turkmen in Syria", 24 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34910389>; The Guardian, "Turkey caught between aiding Turkmen and economic dependence on Russia", 24 November 2015.

¹⁴ Majid Khadduri, "The Alexandretta dispute", *The American Journal of International Law*, 39:3, (1945) 409-426.

¹⁵ Josef Joffe, "A letter from the Prince to Putin", *Wall street Journal Europe*, 6 March 2014, <http://www.hoover.org/research/letter-prince-putin>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Marcus, "Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal", *BBC News*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537>.

¹⁷ Pasquale De Micco, "The prospect of Eastern Mediterranean gas production: An alternative energy supplier for the EU?", *DG Expo/B/PolDep/Note/2014_95*.

¹⁸ Ebru Ogulru, "Turkey amidst the shifting geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Rethink Institute Washington DC*, 9-2013.

characterizing her as a partly rogue state.¹⁹ Recent facts have just amplified the foregoing assessment.

¹⁹ Ian O. Lesser, "Turkey, the United States and the delusion of geopolitics", Routledge, *Survival*, 48:3, (2006), 83-96.