



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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Russia and Turkey: A New Alignment?

by Sinan Ciddi

Ankara's relationship with Moscow is one that is historically fraught with suspicion and friction. Since the end of the Cold War, both sides have established an important economic relationship that has set itself a bold, and perhaps unreachable, target of \$100 billion in bilateral trade. This economic aspiration, however, is counterbalanced by differing prerogatives in the strategic and geo-political realm. Turkey, representing the eastern flank of the NATO alliance, has historically partnered with the United States and the European Union to contain Russian influence in eastern and central Europe, in addition to the Caucasus. Recent developments in the Syrian civil war, however, have resulted in a strange congruence of interests and seeming cooperation between the two capitals. It would be a stretch, however, to argue that this will last and result in a deepening strategic relationship. Since 2012, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has fallen at odds with both the Obama and the Trump administrations for actively supporting Kurdish rebels inside of Syria to defeat the self-proclaimed Islamic State (or ISIS), which the Turks identify as an offshoot of the country's separatist and terrorist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). In turn, the Russian government has, with the help of Iran, established a process of defeating not only ISIS inside of Syria but also of all anti-Assad regime fighters, with the intention of stabilizing the pro-Russian regime. This has left policy analysts wondering whether Turkey is actively distancing itself from its transatlantic and pro-western orientation and adopting a closer strategic relationship with Russia.

To be sure, there are a great number of issues that have resulted in a deep schism between Turkey

MES Notes

On Tuesday, 12 February 2019, Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) will host HE Ambassador Andris Teikmanis, Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America, and Colonel Dzintars Roga, Latvian Defence, Military, Air and Naval Attaché in Washington DC, for a lecture entitled "Securing Transatlantic Alliance: US Role in Baltics" as part of the AY19 MES Lecture Series "Revisionist Powers, Rogue Regimes, and the International Order: The Evolving European Security Challenges".

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

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MES at MCU Disclaimer

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and the US. US backing of Kurdish rebels to defeat ISIS can be seen as the tip of the iceberg. In return, Turkey has concluded the purchase (if not actual deployment) of a Russian S-400 missile defense system as a means to bolster its air defenses in clear preference to the US made Patriot system. This has resulted in overt threats by US authorities to Turkish counterparts that if the Russian missiles are deployed, this will prevent the transfer of over 100 units of the F-35 fighter aircraft to Turkey by the US, mainly because Russian crews will operate the S-400 batteries and would be in a prime position to gain proprietary information regarding the F-35's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, Erdogan's government has engaged in hostile behavior by arbitrarily detaining US citizens as bargaining chips to compel Washington to accede to Turkish policy demands, specifically over Syria. In return, the US, in addition to sanctioning Turkish cabinet ministers, has threatened further punitive measures against Turkey—ones which could seriously cripple Turkey's already debt-ridden and fragile economy, desperately in need of investor confidence and financing.

Instead of mending fences with the US and requesting emergency financial assistance from the US-dominated IMF and/or World Bank, could it be that Erdogan is more interested in turning to new 'allies' such as Russia and China to achieve his regional and wider foreign policy agenda? The purchasing of sovereign debt by China is just one avenue in which China is advancing its global ambition of unseating the US as the sole economic and military hegemon and would be quite attractive to the government of Erdogan, precisely because monetary loans from China are likely to carry less conditionality than those obtained from the IMF and World Bank. Other than a historical security apparatus rooted in Cold War concerns and limited trade relations, there is not much that binds Turkey and the US together. On the other hand, Russia and Turkey have a significant economic partnership that not only spans a number of critical sectors, but also makes Turkey increasingly dependent on Russia. In the realm of energy, Turkey derives 55 per cent of its natural gas need (which produces 60 per cent of Turkey's electricity) directly from Russia. Both countries have also signed an agreement resulting in the construction of at least one Russian nuclear power plant in Turkey. Aware of his country's potential as a transit hub for Russian gas to Europe—one which bypasses Ukraine—Erdogan has signed and initiated a pipeline project with Russia that could come to life in as early as 2019. Dubbed 'Turkish Stream', Russian gas would be transported through Turkey to the EU via Bulgaria. The Russian domestic market is a vital source of Turkish exports, including cars, agricultural produce, and textiles. Furthermore, the influx of 4-5 million Russian tourists to Turkey in 2017 represents 12 percent of the country's total, and a significant source of revenue. To crown these vital areas of economic synergy, one must bear in mind that this bilateral relationship is not dependent upon shared values such as human rights and democratic governance, a factor which has further embittered Turkey's relationship with the US and the EU.

Despite the economic argument, Turkey's supposed re-alignment towards Russia and

MES Notes (Outreach)

29 October 2018

MES hosted HE Ambassador Kåre Aas, Ambassador of Norway to the United States of America, and RADM Ole Morten Sandquist, Norwegian Defense and Naval Attaché in Washington DC, for a lecture entitled "Norwegian Perspective on our Relationship with Russia and the High North" as part of the AY19 MES Lecture Series.

7 November 2018

MES hosted a panel discussion entitled "Iran: Building Bridges and Widening Gulfs" as part of the AY19 MES Lecture Series and as part of the Diplomacy and Statecraft instructional block of the MCU Marine Corps War College (MCWAR). Essays submitted by the guest speakers were published in the December 2018 issue of *MES Insights* (v9i6).

15-18 November 2018

Amin Tarzi presented a paper on Afghanistan as part of an academic panel entitled "Constitutions in the Contemporary Middle East: (How) do they still matter?" at the Middle East Studies Association's (MESA) 52nd Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX.

China—a clear preference that would put it in the Eurasia camp and possibly out of NATO—is not likely to materialize. Turkey and Russia have vastly differing strategic priorities and visions. In the immediate future, Turkey is ambivalent about a Russian-Iranian-backed military assault on the last rebel-held town of Idlib in Syria. Erdogan has so-far succeeded in preventing the operation from taking place. This may not last for much longer. Russia has a clear interest to end the Syrian civil war once and for all and see the Assad regime fully in control of the country once again. This presents a number of problems for Turkey: the battle for Idlib would certainly result in new waves of refugees destined for Turkey, which the country is not in a position to cope with as it already hosts over 3.5 million Syrians. In addition, it is highly likely that the extremist elements comprising the remnants of the Syrian resistance which Turkey has actively supported (Hayat Tahrir al Sham, and other ISIS/former al-Qaeda elements) would likely flee into Turkey and pose a security threat to Turkey internally. In the longer term, Turkey has little to gain with a re-empowered Assad regime, which is likely to present a resentful posture against Erdogan, precisely because Erdogan tried to topple his regime and replace it with a Sunni alternative. Strategically speaking, Turkey also remains largely isolated in the region and in the event it does not patch up its relationship with its partners, is likely to face increased security and economic challenges, which its NATO, US, and EU anchor have largely shielded Ankara from hitherto. Consider the point that Turkey has no real alternative to renewing and maintaining its military capacity independent of US-made products—namely the F-35 fighter. It is for such reasons that Erdogan has recently initiated several overtures to begin rebuilding relationships with allies he has seriously strained. The freeing of US cleric Andrew Brunson in mid-October, was a clear attempt to deescalate tensions with the US and prevent further sanctions being levied against Turkey. More recently, the alleged murder of *The Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has resulted in Erdogan attempting to marginalize Saudi Arabia in the eyes of the US and the EU, and raise Turkey’s profile as a more credible partner by divulging precise intelligence regarding events that led to Khashoggi’s death.

Turkey remains more distant towards its once stalwart alliance with the US and partnership with the EU than at any other point in recent history. However, in the coming months we are likely to witness more overt measures to rekindle and reaffirm these embittered ties, if only for pragmatic and practical reasons.

Dr. Sinan Ciddi is a visiting assistant professor and the executive director of the Institute of Turkish Studies in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

MES Notes (PME)

7 December 2018

Amin Tarzi taught a class entitled “Islamic State - Present and Future Challenges” at the Marine Corps War College (MCWAR).

2 January 2019

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Iranian Maritime Capabilities to the Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS).

3-31 January 2019

Amin Tarzi taught the MCU Command and Staff College (CSC) elective “The State of Israel in Context, 1948-2018”.

24 January 2019

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Iran to the Senior Enlisted Professional Military Education (SEPME) course.

29 January 2019

Adam Seitz presented a guest lecture on Yemen to Dr. Chris Harmon’s CSC elective “State Powers and Low Intensity Warfare in Peacetime”.

31 January 2019

MES hosted General Robert Magnus (USMC, Ret) as a guest speaker for Dr. Tarzi’s CSC elective “The State of Israel in Context, 1948-2018”.

MES Joins The Brute Krulak Center at MCU

by Valerie A. Jackson



Think Tank. Do Tank. That is what the aptly named Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity is for the Marine Corps. We officially stood up as of July 2018, and as of January 1st, the Middle East Studies center joined the Krulak Center, adding to our impressive portfolio of subject-matter-experts. We offer MCU, the Marine Corps, and beyond accomplished experts in a variety of high-demand, relevant areas that broaden and enhance students' educational experience and prepare them for our current and future fight. Now in addition to Dr. Amin Tarzi and Mr. Adam Seitz in MES, we are proud to house Dr. Chris Yung, Donald Bren Chair for Non-Western Strategic Thought; Dr. Michael Baskin, professor of Expeditionary Energy; Dr. Brandon Valeriano, Donald Bren Chair for Armed Politics; Mr. Donald Bishop, retired Department of State, Donald Bren Chair of Strategic Communication; Dr. Chris Harmon, Donald Bren Chair for Great Power Competition; Mr. JD Work, Donald Bren Chair for Cyber Conflict; and Dr. Jeb Nadaner, Donald Bren Chair for Applied Creativity. These expert patriots, along with the combined talents and initiative of LtCol Matt Chambliss, Maj Tim Riemann and Maj Rob Arant, have created a Center that has not previously existed at Marine Corps University. The Center is the integrator—the "general support artillery" as BGen Bowers, our President likes to say—for all University schools. Our first of many programs like it—the Energy and Innovation Scholars Program for students from all schools, to include the College of Distance Education, is a prime example of how we support the Marine Corps' educational enterprise. We've hosted wargames on Operations in the Information Environment; speakers on publishing, complexity theory, performance coaching and virtual reality technology; facilitated an educational seminar with the Marine Corps War College on Chinese Strategy; and are in the process of helping to plan the University's 2019 Innovation Summit. The new addition of MES to the Krulak Center makes perfect sense. As an internationally known body of Middle East thought and academic production, MES is already doing what the Krulak Center is starting in other focus areas. Now as one body, the Center can streamline these processes and mutually enhance our efforts for the benefit of our customers, most importantly, the students at MCU. This disparate but incredible team has turned a shell of a room with used furniture and holes in the walls and professors scattered across the University into a Center of Excellence in just a few short months. I am enormously proud to be the Director, and look forward to bringing the talent and resident expertise of the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity to you and our nation's warfighters. Please come and visit us on the second deck of the Gray Research Center on the campus of Marine Corps University, and follow us on Twitter @TheKrulakCenter.

Ms. Jackson is the Director of the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity at MCU and is also a colonel in the US Marine Corps Reserve.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

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