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# RUSSIA

Confidential

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Anastasia Ponamareva, Sergey Ponamarev report from Moscow:

## MOSCOW AND THE PERSIAN-OTTOMAN KNOT\*

### SUMMARY

*On November 22 Russian president Vladimir Putin held a meeting in Sochi with president of Iran Hassan Rouhani and president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The talks were devoted to the Syrian settlement process, taking into account the joint work in the Astana format. As known, since the beginning of the year, Astana has hosted talks on the regulation of the Syrian crisis, organised by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, which have taken on the role of guarantors for the ceasefire regime in the Syrian Arab Republic. This is one of a number of examples of successful collaboration between the sides as part of efforts to de-escalate the conflict in Syria, and it provides grounds for optimistic predictions regarding longer-term partnerships in the Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle.*

*Beyond that, political scientists Anastasia Ponamareva and Sergey Ponamarev argue that Moscow could act as a mediator in the search for solutions to existing problems on the Turkish-Iranian diplomatic agenda, taking on a balancing role in the triangle that emerges. In this edition of Russia Confidential, the experts discuss the economic background of relations between Iran and Turkey, and areas where their interests intersect in Syria, taking into account "the Kurdish factor", and also draw conclusions about the possibilities emerging for Russia as this "Persian-Ottoman knot" is unravelled.*

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\* In preparing this article, the authors used materials from meetings of the SWOT Analysis Group, Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences, Russian Academy of Sciences.

Over the past two years, the main external factors influencing the nature of bilateral relations between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, have been:

- The conclusion of a Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) to normalise the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme and the changed external economic climate for Tehran as a result of the lifting of international sanctions;
- *Oscillating* development of relations between Moscow and Ankara, in the context of the changing situation in Syria, and taking into account the incident of the Russian Su-24 bomber that was downed by the Turkish Air Force while it was on operations in Syrian Arab Republic airspace.

The high-volume of events underscores how important it is to build cooperation among the Russia-Iran-Turkey triangle, in order to strengthen security not only in the region but also in the wider world. Given the longstanding geopolitical rivalry between Sunni Ankara and Shiite Tehran, Moscow is ideally positioned to take on the role of intermediary in the search for solutions to the many problem areas on the Turkish-Iranian diplomatic agenda.

#### IRAN AND TURKEY: POLITICAL RELATIONS ON AN ECONOMIC LIFELINE

Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey in 2002, Ankara has started to use joint economic projects as a counterbalance to political differences with Iran.

- Investment and tourist flows from Iran to Turkey have grown significantly: Iran has become Turkey's 5th largest trading partner. Involvement in financial projects on Turkish soil offered Iranian companies, which were under pressure from Western sanctions, access to the international market. In 2012, when Iranian banks - due to US and EU sanctions - were cut off from the SWIFT international banking settlement system, operations started being processed via partner-banks in Turkey. Iran also moved to a barter system for raw materials, paying for Turkish gold in direct oil shipments. **In the end, the sanctions regime helped strengthen Iranian-Turkish financial partnership.**
- Turkish companies' involvement in Iran's food industry, construction, telecoms, and energy sectors, combined with the fear that tougher sanctions from Washington may dampen this cooperation, forced Turkey to become involved in one of the most sensitive areas of international relations - dealing with the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme. Efforts by Turkish intermediaries, in tandem with the Brazilians, resulted in the signing of an agreement with the Iranian side for the transfer of about 1.2 tonnes of low-enriched Iranian uranium to Turkey, where it would be processed into 120kg of 20% uranium. Even though this may not have been a breakthrough on the Iranian Nuclear Programme, **the Tehran declaration demonstrated Turkey's intention to act as a mediator in resolving regional problems.**
- Iran is, after Russia, the second biggest supplier of natural gas to Turkey, accounting for 20% of Turkey's total energy imports. Pre-2012, Iran was the main supplier of oil to Turkey, but facing the threat of falling under US sanctions over the Iranian Nuclear Programme, Ankara slashed import volumes.
- Since Iran strives for an expanded participation in the production and transporting of energy resources, the transportation of Iranian gas to the European and Asian markets and the country's transformation into a strategic transit oil and gas hub in the region, **in this field cooperation between**

**Ankara and Tehran can be characterised as a competitive battle.** By participating in the *Turkish Stream* project, Ankara expects to weaken its regional competitor regarding energy resource transit.

One way or another, the economic cooperation between Iran and Turkey serves merely as the *background* for political cooperation, and the most pressing issue in bilateral relations between Ankara and Tehran remains the situation in Syria.

#### POINTS OF INTERSECTION IN SYRIA: THE KURDISH FACTOR

Given the situation, Turkey could, under certain circumstances, accept a scenario in which Bashar al Assad stays in power for a considerable period of time. The ***sine qua non***\* for Ankara is to ensure that no Kurdish territorial or political entity forms on Syrian soil (or separates from Syria), as this would inevitably have a destabilising influence on Turkish Kurdistan. Since August 2016, Turkey has been carrying out Operation Euphrates Shield on Syrian territory. Its main goal is to destroy *Islamic State (IS)* militants in neighbouring territory and free populated areas from their control. A less signposted but no less important goal of the operation is to prevent the Kurds from uniting three cantons in northern Syria into one. It is also particularly important for Turkey not to allow Iran and armed Shiite groups to strengthen their military presence on Syrian soil. On this last issue, Turkey's interests are fully aligned with those of Israel.

**For Iran**, in turn, it is exceptionally important that Syria remains united, in which (at least in key Muhafazats\*\*) the leading role in politics, the economy, and security questions continues to be played by the Alawites. Tehran has no desire to see a powerful autonomous Kurdish area.

It should not be forgotten that the **Kurds are far from united**. They are not only divided along territorial, confessional, and language lines, but also along political lines. Provisionally, one can identify at least three political movements. Two competing parties of de-facto independent Iraqi Kurdistan: 1) Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP/PDK) and 2) Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), in addition to 3) Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), recognised in the United States and Turkey as a terrorist organisation. While Syrian Kurds find themselves in confrontation with Turkey, Iraqi Kurds have been able to establish mutually beneficial relations with Ankara. Russia has succeeded in supporting cooperation with Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, although Moscow does not view the PKK as a potential partner.

As of today, there is no single Kurdish national liberation movement aiming to establish an independent Kurdistan. **Iraqi Kurds** exploit their right to broad autonomy and have *de facto* established own state within Iraq. Separating from it would deprive them of their weighty political and economic dividends and destroy the stability that everyone, apart from the radical 5% that you see in any movement, so values. Separatist slogans are essentially used by Iraqi Kurds as a tool to exert pressure when they need to get more funds from the federal budget.

***Thus, the idea of Kurdish independence is not as destructive as it could be, since key adherents are not particularly interested in achieving it.***

**Syrian Kurds** in turn cannot lead the independence movement since they do not have as developed a political structure as their Iraqi counterparts. They do not have the economic foundations of Iraqi Kurdistan (highly lucrative oil-rich region), nor do

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\* *Latin*. essential condition.

\*\* Muhafazat (pl), Muhafazah (s) - territorial and administrative entity in the Syrian Arab Republic.

they have powerful extra-regional sponsors in their struggle for self-determination (e.g. the West, seeking to enter into confrontation with the Saddam Hussein regime).

**The confrontation between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds helps prolong the crisis in the Middle East. For Ankara, countering Syrian Kurds' nationalism is a matter of national security. It even views prospects for a significant improvement in relations with Washington as secondary compared to its interest in resolving the Kurdish issue. Any coalition could be derailed by a destabilisation related to Syrian Kurds.**

The optimum exit from the resulting situation, **as Ankara sees it**, is to maintain the Syrian-Kurdish project in a *semi-comatose state*, including by squeezing Kurdish rebel groups out of border regions and instead creating a *secure buffer zone* in those territories. That is why the Turkish military fought on to oust *IS* from its *last stronghold* in Aleppo and joined forces with Syrian opposition forces to establish control over the city of El-Bab.

The integrity of Syrian territories will to a great extent be a formality, just as is the case with Iraq. It is highly likely that some form of Turkish control or anti-Assad forces loyal to Ankara will remain in a number of regions in the country's north. Consequently, Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) will not be able to become an entity with a single territory. In addition, a complete routing of Syrian Kurds would hardly be permitted by **Moscow or Washington**, for whom the Kurds are an important element in maintaining equilibrium. Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria will, it seems, remain the main outpost of American presence in the country.

**Iran faces a serious dilemma in Syria.** Tehran would presumably like to see a strengthening of the current configuration, under which Iranian influence is extended to various degrees in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Naturally, they would not oppose a further strengthening of Shiite Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the main obstacle to which is the Saudi monarchy. But at the same time, there is a real risk of the forces required to achieve these ends becoming overstretched. If, despite everything, Tehran decides to favour maintaining and even expanding its military presence in Syria (including establishing a naval base on the Mediterranean), then it could end up in dangerous isolation. The alternative is the withdrawal of the *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*, other armed divisions, and *Hezbollah* groupings from Syrian territory, once Tehran has received guarantees of continued political influence in Damascus.

**US forces**, aiming at returning to the region will likely be comparable in terms of activity to the Russian military forces following the conclusion of the military rout of *IS* in Syria, and that must be taken into account. At the same time, the Trump Administration will favour the gradual rejection and isolation of Iran, judging from the course that Washington is following, i.e. introducing new unilateral sanctions on Iran, and thus violating the spirit of the JCPOA and pushing Tehran to depart from the Vienna agreement. This course of action, if pursued by the American administration, could qualitatively change the situation in the Middle East, and not for the better from a security perspective.

#### PERSIAN-TURKISH KNOT AND RUSSIA'S CAPABILITIES

Talks have been underway since January 2017 in Astana to resolve the Syrian crisis. They are organised by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, which take on the role of guarantors of the ceasefire regime in the Syrian conflict. Seeking to act in coordination with all conflicting parties that are *fit for dialogue*, Russia, Turkey, and Iran ensure participation in diplomatic resolution of both representatives of the Syrian government and the armed opposition groups. In order to support Syria's sovereignty,

independence, and territorial integrity, and to prevent foreign military involvement that has not been agreed with the legitimate authorities in the Syrian Arab Republic, Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran have agreed to create a trilateral mechanism to monitor the observation of the ceasefire regime and prevent provocations.

In the context of cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, it is worth considering the successful conclusion of Syrian Arab Republic government forces' to liberate Aleppo from terrorist groupings, which took place with support from Russia and Iran, and the fact that IS was squeezed out of El-Bab by Free Syrian Army forces, with Ankara's support. With the exception of those forces working towards the complete routing of IS, the intensity of armed conflict in Syria has significantly decreased.

**This level of effective cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran could seem unprecedented.** But the concept of this form of cooperation is far from new. The renowned Crimean Tartar thinker Ismail Gasprinsky back in 1896 in his Russian-Eastern Agreement proposed the idea of positive and mutually beneficial rapprochement between Russia and both Turkey and Persia. Gasprinsky was critical of the West's goals: "Acting now against Russia, now against Muslims, the Europeans in each case draw benefit and move on... The East should not expect anything good from the West." Gasprinsky suggested concluding an agreement with the Ottoman Empire and Persia on the establishment of Russian naval bases in the Mediterranean and "somewhere near" the Indian Ocean. For Turkey and Persia, Gasprinsky argued, such an agreement would offer them "the ability to more peacefully focus on their renaissance, taking as their model not the West but Russia, which is closer to them in civilization terms and in terms of people's lives."

**Thus, in the context of the Syrian crisis, there are currently significant grounds to maintain the Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle.** The lack of mutual trust between Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran could be compensated for if each side favours a strategy, which ensures all three participants have a positive balance of wins and losses while keeping attendant risks at acceptable levels.

Today, all three countries have rather complex relations with the West, and in that sense, it is as if Ismail Gasprinsky's ideas are taking on a new life. However, the consistent consolidation of Russia, Turkey, and Iran is seen not around anti-Western sentiments, and possible discord is not due to a sudden awakening in one of them of a particular reverence for the values of the *free world*.

*The common denominator here could be significant, long term, military presence of Russia in Syria, which would be more acceptable for Turkey and Israel, than Iran's. Only a Russian presence makes it possible to ensure a political mechanism and balance of forces in Syria that would satisfy Iran if, under pressure from other players (including the US and the EU) it has to roll-back its own presence in Syria and that of Hezbollah. In conclusion, only Moscow lacks existential grounds to fear a strengthening of the Kurds, and consequently, it is easier for Russia than for other participants in the triangle to interact with Rojava.*

Russia's departure from Syria, whether voluntary or under duress due to extraordinary circumstances would lead to the formation of a power vacuum, that would be filled by the US, Turkey, and Gulf countries on the one hand, and Iran - on the other. The negative consequences of such a turn in developments for the greater Middle East would not take long to emerge. In other words, the time when Moscow could plan and implement a realistic *exit strategy* is in the past. Guaranteeing the peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict or, at least, ensuring sufficiently resilient ceasefire is currently virtually impossible without a significant Russian military presence.

This presence is serious and for the long term. It requires significant resources. It is clear that Russia will need to recoup this expense by receiving serious economic preferences from Syria itself and from other parts of the greater Middle East. Political and military strategy successes need to be converted into economic dividends. Maintaining trilateral Russian-Iranian-Turkish partnership in some form is a credible way of achieving this.

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