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## Turkey-Russia Jet Incident

### **Background:**

Turkey, Russia, and several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members experienced a crisis precipitated by Ankara's downing of a Russian Su-24 fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015. The crisis terminated on 29 June 2016.

Prior to the Syrian Civil War, relations between Russia and NATO members were largely cordial, though not without incident. Minor tensions arose at various points during the 2000s due to NATO expansion, Russia's invasion of Georgia, and potential United States anti-missile deployments in Europe. Russia's bilateral relations with Turkey had grown relatively strong, with a robust trading partnership and bilateral agreements on issues ranging from visa-free travel to energy production and transport.

Relations between Russia and the Turkey-NATO bloc soured beginning in 2011 as they took opposing positions in the Syrian civil war. The U.S., Turkey, and many NATO members began calling for Assad's departure when he responded harshly to peaceful protests in 2011 and eventually began providing support to rebel groups fighting the regime. Russia strongly supported its long-standing ally and used its veto power to prevent any United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action against Damascus.

In December 2012, NATO agreed to deploy Patriot missile systems along the Turkey-Syria border at Turkey's request, following a series of border incidents between the two states (see Case #468). The U.S. and Germany supplied the missile systems, which were scheduled to remain in Turkey for three years.

Tensions between Moscow and the NATO bloc reached their highest point since the Cold War in early 2014 when Russia semi-covertly invaded the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine (see Case # 471). Russia also began testing NATO military preparedness by provocatively violating members' airspace and territorial waters, particularly in Eastern and Northern Europe. The U.S. and a collection of countries, including many NATO members, began bombing the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria in late summer 2014, around the same time that tensions began to rise in Europe.

### **PRE-CRISIS:**

Russia joined the Syrian conflict on 30 September 2015, bombing both designated terrorist groups such as ISIL and Western-backed rebels in Syria. Although the U.S. and Russia claimed to be communicating to avoid any mishaps or misinterpretation of intentions in Syria, Russia violated Turkish airspace on several occasions. After several unproductive meetings with Russian officials about these violations and Russia's bombing of ethnic Turkmen Syrians that were fighting Assad, Ankara determined that the threat posed by additional airspace violations required a strong response.

### **Summary:**

On 24 November 2015, a Russian Su-24 fighter jet violated Turkish airspace over the Hatay Province for a total of 17 seconds, triggering a crisis for Turkey. Turkish authorities attempted to

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warn the jet a total of ten times over five minutes prior to the violation without any response from the plane. Turkey deployed F-16 fighter jets and shot down the Russian plane, an act that doubled as Turkey's major response and the crisis trigger for Russia. Both pilots ejected and the jet crashed on the Syrian side of the border. One pilot was killed by anti-Assad militants and the other was recovered by Syrian and Russian special forces. A Russian helicopter was also shot down during the rescue mission, killing one Russian marine. Ankara stated it was defending its airspace and immediately contacted its NATO allies to discuss the incident and gain reassurances of support, and it also delivered a letter to the UNSC presenting its account of the events. That same day, Russia denied the plane ever received a warning and insisted it never entered Turkish airspace. Russia also promised "significant consequences," which constituted the most important part of its major response to the crisis.

The downing of the jet also initiated crises for several NATO members—the U.S., United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Denmark. These five states had already committed or were soon to commit military personnel to direct involvement in the Syrian theater, and therefore feared that any escalation could draw them into potentially lethal conflict with Russia due to their Article V commitments of mutual defense. Their major responses occurred on 24 November. That day, NATO began a two-day emergency meeting at Ankara's request. The NATO Secretary General, U.S. President Obama, French President Hollande, German Chancellor Merkel, and U.K. Prime Minister Cameron all defended Turkey's right to defend its airspace, spoke with Turkish leaders, and called for calm and communication between Moscow and Ankara. NATO also stated that its members' assessments supported Turkey's account of the jet downing incident.

On 25 November, Russia implemented the remainder of its major response: deploying air-defense assets (advanced S-400 missile systems to its air base in Syria's Latakia province and a warship to the eastern Mediterranean Sea), bombing Turkmen militias in northern Syria close to the site where the jet was downed in support of Kurdish fighters, breaking military ties with Ankara, cancelling a visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and discouraging Russian citizens from traveling to Turkey. Despite the bevy of responses, Russia declared that same day that it had no intent of going to war with Turkey, thereby terminating Russia's crisis.

Tensions nonetheless continued to increase under an uncertain threat of Russian reprisal. On 28 November, Russia imposed sanctions targeting Turkish workers, goods, and tourism. That same day, Ankara announced the deployment of advanced jamming equipment to southern Turkey to counter the earlier deployment of Russian air-defense systems. Around this time, the leaders of some NATO states began individually discussing the situation with Putin. Hollande met with Russian President Putin on 26 November, primarily to discuss cooperation on countering ISIL, but he also called for de-escalation of the situation between Turkey and Russia. On the sidelines of the climate summit in Paris on 30 November, Obama and Merkel met with Putin to discuss the incident and other ongoing operations in Syria and Iraq. Cameron spoke with Putin on 9 December and agreed to provide U.K. assistance in analyzing the black box from the downed Su-24.

NATO held an important three-day Foreign Ministers meeting beginning on 30 November and decided to augment Turkey's maritime and air defenses. The U.S. agreed to keep the USS

Donald Cook—an anti-ballistic missile and air defense vessel—in the region. Germany and Denmark each committed to deploying a naval ship to the eastern Mediterranean. Denmark's vessel was intended to counter the Russian S-400 system and to protect Turkey from any electronic intelligence gathering. Italy agreed to provide additional air-defense missile systems, and Spain agreed to extend the presence of its Patriot missile systems, which were already in Turkey as part of an earlier agreement. The German and Danish vessels arrived in the eastern Mediterranean later in December. Italy deployed the air-defense system to Turkey on 5 June 2016.

On 13 December, Russia fired a warning shot at a Turkish vessel in the Aegean Sea, in what was widely regarded as retaliation for the downing of the Russian jet. In response, Turkey stated that its patience was limited and that Russia was overreacting, and it criticized Russia's military intervention in Syria. In mid and late December, hundreds of thousands of Turkish websites were hacked, forcing the government to temporarily block all foreign internet traffic to Turkish websites. There was some speculation that Russian hackers were responsible, but that allegation remains unproven. Controversy continues about the exact Russian role in the cyber attacks.

On 18 December, the black box from the downed Su-24 was determined to be too damaged to provide any insight into the event. In a meeting that same day, NATO decided to further bolster Turkey's defense capabilities by agreeing to provide German-manned Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) to assist in monitoring Turkish airspace. Some NATO sources indicated the group intended these actions to not only secure Turkey, but also to restrain both Turkey and Russia. The U.S. and Germany withdrew their Patriot missile systems from the Turkish-Syria border on 22 December, per the agreement signed three years earlier. NATO deployed the promised AWACS system to Turkey and began monitoring Turkish airspace on 12 March 2016.

Turkey alleged that a Russian (Su-34) plane violated Turkish airspace again on 29 January 2016, a claim supported by the U.S. and NATO. Turkey summoned the Russian ambassador and, along with NATO, publicly called for respect of borders. Russia denied that the incident occurred and alleged that there was no such thing as "NATO airspace."

Tensions rose again in February. In the first week of the month, Russia deployed its newest and most sophisticated aircraft, the SU-35 "Flanker E," to its base in Syria. In mid-February, Turkey began shelling Kurdish positions on the Syrian side of the border and discussing a joint ground invasion in Syria with Saudi Arabia. This prompted Russia to request UNSC discussion of the shelling on 15 February and to submit a draft resolution to halt the shelling and Turkey's plans to launch a ground invasion on 19 February. The UNSC met on 16 and 19 February, but no agreement was reached; France, the U.K., and the U.S. were among those rejecting the Russian draft resolution.

Press reports also began to appear in mid-February in which some NATO member government officials—especially Luxembourg, Germany, and France—said that they were not interested in defending Turkey if it provoked a war with Russia. This occurred as ongoing U.S.-Russian negotiations aimed at establishing peace in the Syrian civil war began gaining steam. Turkey quickly indicated that it would not invade Syria without a U.S.-led coalition. The events of mid-

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February provided Ankara with a clear indication of the limits of NATO's willingness to support Turkey and constituted the termination of the crisis for the NATO members.

Russian-Turkish tensions continued to simmer for the next four months. Then, on 27 June, Turkish President Erdogan sent a letter to Putin indicating his regret for the jet downing incident and informing him that the pilots of the F-16s involved in the shooting were being investigated. Two days later, Presidents Erdogan and Putin spoke on the phone for the first time since the incident. They expressed a determination to jointly fight terrorism and agreed to meet in person. After the talk, Russia lifted its sanctions targeting Turkey's tourist industry, and both parties planned to normalize trade relations and stated that "this crisis chapter" was closed. This terminated the crisis for Turkey, and the international crisis as a whole.

The UN had limited involvement in the crisis. In addition to the UNSC's discussion of the situation, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement on 24 November calling for de-escalation and a thorough review of the incident.

After the crisis terminated, Russia continued its military actions in Syria, including near the Turkish border, and its support for the Assad regime. Nevertheless, Russia and Turkey made further moves to restore their bilateral relationship. On 1 July, the two countries' foreign ministers met in Sochi and agreed to establish closer diplomatic contact and cease operations against all groups in Syria other than ISIL, al-Nusra Front, and al-Qaeda-aligned groups. Attempts to repair relations proceeded more rapidly after a July coup attempt against Erdogan. Some media sources indicated that Russia provided intelligence to Erdogan about the attempted coup. On 9 August, Erdogan and Putin met in person for the first time since the jet downing incident and stated that a consensus on normalizing ties had been established. The warming of relations between Russia and Turkey coincided with U.S. and European Union criticism of Erdogan's crackdown on the Turkish opposition in the wake of the failed coup. NATO-Russia cooperation on destroying ISIL also continued after the crisis.

**Sources:**

Al-Jazeera; Aviation Voice; BBC, Bloomberg; CNN; Daily Sabah; DefenseNews; Express; Foreign Policy; France 24; Guardian; Hill; Hurriyet Daily News; Moscow Times; NATO; NYT; Observer; Reuters; RT News; Spiegel; Sputnik; Sun; Telegraph; USA Today; US News; Voice of America; Washington Post; White House Briefing Room; Xinhua; Yahoo News.