



The Dynamics of Trilateral Relations between Turkey, Russia, and Iran

OE Watch Commentary: On 17 April 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Turkey after having meetings in Damascus with Syrian regime officials. This visit came ahead of a scheduled meeting of Russia, Iran and Turkey in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nursultan (formerly Astana). Even though Zarif's visits were announced as efforts to solve the Syrian conflict, it seems they might have had other intentions as well. On one hand, Iranian efforts aim to facilitate a dialogue between the government of Bashar Al-Assad and the Turkish government to prevent Turkey from launching military operations further into Syrian territory. On the other hand, Iran aims to bring Syria's eastern and northeastern regions under the control of the Syrian regime so that it can undermine American influence in the region and balance Russian ambitions in Syria. The accompanying article from pro-Kurdish news agency *Mezopotamya Ajansi* and an interview from independent Turkish news portal *Medyascope* discuss dynamics of trilateral relations among these three countries.



Vladimir Putin, Hassan Rouhani, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.
Source: Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin,_Hassan_Rouhani,_Recep_Tayyip_Erdo%C4%9Fan_02.jpg, CC BY 4.0

The article from *Mezopotamya Ajansi* provides a Kurdish perspective on relations between Turkey, Russia and Iran. According to the article, while Russia tries to continue its strategic relationship with Turkey to weaken NATO, it does not want Turkey to sever its ties with NATO. Russia rather prefers Turkey remain a NATO member who continues to have problems with its NATO allies. As such, Russia intends to weaken NATO through a member that constantly troubles the alliance. The article also discusses deteriorating relations between Russia and Iran due to conflicting objectives in Syria. Russia has signaled its objection to Iran's presence in Syria. Meanwhile, Iran intends to strengthen its military presence and remain in Syria. At times, friction between the two countries has led to military confrontations. Competition for control over Aleppo has been a significant point of contention. This rivalry will ultimately have a significant affect in the future of Syria and the Syrian conflict.

The interview from *Medyascope* with Middle East expert Erhan Keleşoğlu states that Turkey's alliance with Iran and Russia is a tactical one due to developments in Syria and a desire to counterbalance American power and involvement in the region. Turkey cannot maintain its presence in Syria without the consent of Russia and Iran. While Turkey supports the opposition in the Syrian conflict, Russia and Iran have been ardent supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. However, these countries have converging interests in other areas. Iran and Turkey have converging interests regarding Kurdish groups in their respective countries. Turkey also relies on Iran for natural gas and Iran expects support or neutrality from Turkey in its strategy to undermine the alliance spearheaded by Saudi Arabia to isolate Iran in the region. The author states that Iran has the ability to navigate between Turkey and Russia. There is growing interdependence between Russia and Turkey as both countries have signed agreements to cooperate in several areas from defense to energy. Turkey needs Russian natural gas and Russia needs a market to export its natural energy resources. Overall, Russia seems to be accommodating Turkey on many fronts. The developments in Syria will shape the future of this trilateral relationship. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“The alliance of Russia, Iran and Turkey was formed as a tactical alliance against the United States’ involvement in Syria...”

Source: “Suriye’de dengeler oturmadı: Türkiye ve İran çıkmazda (Unsettled balance in Syria: Turkey and Iran Impasse),” *Mezopotamyaajansi.com*, 3 May 2019. <https://mezopotamyaajansi.com/ANALIZ/content/view/56302>

Russia gives Turkey some economic concessions to keep Turkey on its side to gain leverage against NATO. Again it is trying to extend the agreements and relations going as much as possible over Idlib and Afrin. While Russia seeks to avoid taking a tough stance towards Turkey until July-August, it also supports Turkey as it develops relations with the [Syrian] regime behind the scenes... Russia prefers a Turkey that remains with NATO rather than a Turkey that severs ties with NATO so that it can trouble the United States politically...

It is said that there is conflict between Russia and Iran, another actor within the Syrian conflict. Russian and Iranian relations has strained due to Russia's stance that Iran and Turkey must leave Syrian soil. This tension [between Russia and Iran] has spread to the areas [that they are] militarily dominant... The main area of contention between Russia and Iran is Aleppo.

Source: Işın Eliçin, “İran-Rusya-Türkiye ittifakı: Erhan Keleşoğlu ile söyleşi (Iran-Russia-Turkey alliance: an interview with Erhan Keleşoğlu),” *Medyascope.tv*, 18 April 2019. <https://medyascope.tv/2019/04/18/iran-rusya-turkiye-ittifaki-erhan-kelesoglu-ile-soylesi/>

Alliance of Russia, Iran and Turkey was formed as a tactical alliance against the United States’ involvement in Syria... The alliance desires to counterbalance the United States. These countries are disturbed by America’s Middles East policy...

[Iran and Turkey] have a Kurdish issue in the region and we can say [Iran and Turkey] have a general security alliance to manage their Kurdish issue...

In terms of solving the [Syrian Conflict] Iran is a significant actor [and] able to maintain relations with all sides on the ground such as Syria, Russia, Turkey [and] in some ways the European Union, all with the exception of United States...

Iran works on a strategy to undermine the alliance formed against it in the region under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. Turkey holds a critical position in this strategy. Iran expects support or at least neutrality from Turkey. Iran wants to keep Turkey on its side to break political and economic isolation against it in the region...

[Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan has stated that an operation on East of Euphrates is still on the table... but he needs the support of Russia and Iran for such an operation.