

# Turkish-Russian-Iranian Summit: Limits to a Tripartite Entente

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Brief Analysis

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**Although any attempts at coordinated action will be hampered by historical rivalries and modern disagreements, Moscow and Tehran can still use the Ankara meeting to harm U.S. interests in Syria.**

**O**n April 4, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan will host his Russian and Iranian counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani, for their first trilateral meeting since a November 22 summit in Sochi. Putin has already commenced his visit, co-chairing the seventh Turkish-Russian High-Level Cooperation Council meeting and attending the groundbreaking ceremony for the Akkuyu nuclear power station in southern Turkey, to be built by Russian nuclear firm Rosatom.

Erdogan, Putin, and Rouhani have been meeting more frequently of late, suggesting the emergence of a tripartite relationship. In reality, however, ties between Ankara and Tehran are wrought with tensions, and Moscow remains

Turkey's historic adversary despite their common cause on certain regional issues.

## THE VIEW FROM ANKARA

**D**uring six centuries of Ottoman rule, the Turks defeated and ruled over all of their neighbors except Russia and Iran, a fact that elevates the two countries in the Turkish Weltanschauung. Accordingly, Ankara tends to tread carefully with the Russians and Iranians, neither confronting nor ignoring them.

The relationship with Moscow suffered from historic rivalries before the twentieth century and throughout the Cold War, but they improved after the fall of the Soviet Union. Helped by booming trade, Turkish-Russian ties took off during the 1990s and 2000s, allowing the two countries to enter a lengthy period of improved relations for the first time in history. Yet the Syria war undermined these ties as Moscow threw its lot behind the Assad regime and Ankara backed his adversaries. The situation worsened in November 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian plane that violated its airspace. Putin responded by slapping Ankara with economic sanctions and threatening to target Turkish forces entering Syria in support of the rebels.

Yet the tide turned again after the failed 2016 coup against Erdogan, which spurred Putin to soften his policy in order to take advantage of growing anti-Western sentiment in Turkey. Many opinion-makers, including members of Erdogan's party, alleged that the United States and other NATO allies were behind the coup. And while some of these same allies were slow in reaching out to Ankara once the coup was put down, Putin called Erdogan the day after and wished him well. Bilateral ties have improved ever since.

In Syria, the Turks and Russians have arrived at a modus vivendi whereby they cut deals and deconflict their forces in the north on a case-by-case basis. Most recently, Putin gave Ankara a green light for Operation Olive Branch, which resulted in Turkey capturing Afrin from the People's Defense Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey's longtime enemy. In return, Erdogan has stayed quiet while Russia helps the Assad regime bomb civilians in East Ghouta, one of the last remaining rebel-held de-escalation zones.

Going forward, Putin will likely offer Erdogan further ad hoc deals in northern Syria, such as in Tal Rifaat, allowing Turkey to make new advances at the YPG's expense in exchange for continued acquiescence to Russian moves. Erdogan would accept most any deal that helps him defeat the YPG and PKK, two organizations that are almost universally despised in Turkey. Putin will also presumably request Ankara's support for the Astana peace process, Russia's alternative to the UN's Geneva-based negotiations aimed at ending the war.

In short, Putin has Turkey exactly where he wants it: as an upset NATO ally willing to break ranks with the alliance's stance toward Russia. Most recently, Turkey joined a few other NATO members in refusing to follow the U.S. path of ejecting Russian diplomats in response to the Kremlin's suspected assassination of a former intelligence officer in Britain. Putin does not want Turkey to leave NATO—he wants it to remain in the alliance as a nonparticipating member, thereby undermining the organization's effectiveness.

As for Turkey and Iran, the relationship is wrought with differences, many of them rooted in Tehran's discomfort about the Afrin operation and similar deals that have allowed Ankara to capture Syrian territory with Putin's blessing. Unlike Moscow, Iran is uncomfortable with a "soft partition" outcome in Syria and objects to any Turkish military presence there. Accordingly, Iranian-backed militias have repeatedly targeted Turkish forces in the north even as Russia green-lights Ankara's cross-border moves.

Putin will therefore face a tall order if he aims to get Rouhani and Erdogan on the same page during this week's summit. Historically speaking, the rival Ottoman and Persian Empires fought themselves into bankruptcy after two centuries of inconclusive wars, so they settled on a power parity relationship in the mid-1600s, agreeing to avoid future conflict against each other at any cost. In Tehran's view, however, Ankara's support for rebels fighting the Iranian-backed regime in Damascus violates that historic parity—indeed, the Syria war is the closest the two

countries have come in recent memory to outright conflict. Iran's fortunes and allies are currently ascendant there, so it will likely attempt to restore its power parity with Turkey on its own terms—namely, by demanding complete cessation of Ankara's support to the rebels and otherwise forcing the Turks to recognize full Iranian control over Syria.

## THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

**S** yria will be Putin's focus during the trilateral talks, while his bilateral conversations with Turkish officials will focus on their tentative agreement to purchase Russian S-400 air-defense systems, currently scheduled for delivery to Turkey in 2020. Although Putin will publicly confirm the sale, it is yet to be seen whether Russia will actually send the missiles—in addition to the quandary of providing sensitive weapons to a long-time rival, this would also expose them to greater U.S. intelligence scrutiny.

Moscow's goal is to make Turks angry at Americans, and Americans angry at Turks. Therefore, its game seems to lie in making the sale look as real as possible, knowing that this impression will further sour NATO's view of Turkey and facilitate Russia's goal of isolating Ankara within the alliance. Putin will exploit the threatened S-400 transfer for as long as he can, and Washington should not dismiss the possibility that the sale might go through in the end.

More broadly, the Turkey visit is Putin's first trip abroad since securing a fourth presidential term on March 18, showing the importance he places on the Middle East and his desire to usurp Washington's role as regional peacemaker. The summit should also highlight his determination to reach a Syria settlement on his terms, with Bashar al-Assad remaining in power and America potentially retreating from the region, to Moscow's benefit. Discussions on Syria will likely focus on Idlib province, the last opposition stronghold. Putin may pressure Erdogan to convince rebel groups there that they should stop fighting Assad; in return, Moscow could agree to allow further Turkish moves against the YPG.

## THE VIEW FROM TEHRAN

**I** ran expects a pullout or significant drawdown of U.S. forces from Syria in the near term. Accordingly, Rouhani's strategy during the Ankara summit may be to contain Turkey's incursion by limiting its advance to immediate border areas following a U.S. withdrawal. In particular, Tehran wants to keep Turkish forces out of Manbij and Afrin city.

Toward that end, Iran seems ready to offer Ankara a deal: namely, guaranteeing Turkey's border security by deploying Syrian forces to Kurdish-majority frontier zones, advised and assisted by Iranian forces. In short, Tehran does not want to see any Turkish troops in Syria once U.S. forces leave. Iran's fundamental strategy there is to regain its primacy and extend its influence in Syria's political and security institutions, much like it has done in Iraq.

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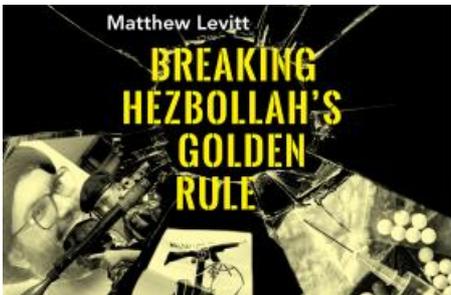
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