Russian Overflight of Turkey: More Than Meets the Eye?

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Brief Analysis

The province that Putin's jets buzzed this weekend holds special demographic and historical significance, raising questions about the incident's potential significance as a warning to Ankara.

Although modern military technology such as radar vectoring and GPS navigational aids make unintentional overflights of neighboring territory relatively rare, such incidents do occur in military operations. But what makes Russia's October 3 overflight of Turkish territory potentially worrisome is its location. According to an October 5 Turkish Foreign Ministry press release, the Russian aircraft flew over the Yayladagi/Hatay region. While that area is close to the Syrian border and not far from fighting between Assad regime and rebel forces, it has dramatic significance for other reasons.

Hatay is populated in part by ethnic Arabs of the Alawite sect of Islam -- the same sect as Bashar al-Assad and most of his closest generals, advisors, and supporters. The province also has a convoluted history that could complicate Ankara's calculus about the Russian intervention. Hatay was known as Sanjak of Alexandretta until the early twentieth century, and its mixed population of Alawite and Sunni Arabs, Turks, Turkmens, Circassians, Armenians, Levantines, and Kurds was not part of Turkey as established by the post-World War I Treaty of Lausanne. Rather, the area was mandated to France along with Syria and Lebanon.

Hatay enjoyed special status within the French mandate and the Syrian "state," with the Turkish community granted cultural and linguistic rights. The territory was later claimed by Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and eventually became a "republic" in 1938 under joint French and Turkish tutelage. Soon thereafter, the Anglo-French-Turkish Treaty of 1939 established a mutual security pact between the three countries, and ceding Hatay to Turkey was seen as a quid pro quo for Ankara's accession to the pact. Although Turkey did not assist France and Britain in World War II -- due to a clause exempting it from any conflict that could lead to combat with the Soviet

Union, which allied with Germany in 1939 -- it still kept Hatay.

Syria never officially acknowledged the loss of Hatay and its considerable Alawite community, however. Syrian maps still do not show Hatay as a part of Turkey (until recently, the regime maintained a similar cartographical attitude toward the entire country of Lebanon). While Damascus stopped emphasizing Hatay as its own territory during a thaw in relations a decade ago between Assad and then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, it did not officially recognize Turkey's sovereignty. And in previous years, Hatay was part of the complex of cold-war-like confrontations between Ankara and Damascus, which included Syrian support for the Kurdish PKK insurgent group and refuge for its leader, at least until Turkey threatened an invasion in the late 1990s. When asked about the Syrian threat to the province in the mid-1980s, Turkish president and military chief Kenan Evren answered in one word: "Gelsinler," or "Let them come."

As Syria's president and the informal leader of the Alawite community, Assad obviously knows this entire story. But does Moscow? It is hard to believe that a country so obsessed with its past and its historical claims (Crimea being only one of many examples) would have missed this connection.

So can one conclude that the overflight was deliberate? A means of warning Turkey that if it does not behave on the Syrian issue, where it is deeply at odds with Russia and Assad, it might pay a high price one day? Perhaps. What one can say with more certainty is that a rational military organization, knowing the history, would have given special warnings to its pilots and radar controllers to not violate Hatay airspace, in part to avoid generating articles like this one suspecting the worst. At minimum, it seems unlikely that such warnings were given. More broadly, as Putin scrambles the deck with force in the Middle East, as he has done in Eastern Europe since 2008, the international community can no longer exclude any motivation for his actions.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey. ❖

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