

Syria Shoots Down Turkish Jet: Washington's Dilemma

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Brief Analysis

The United States must strongly support Turkey even at the cost of diplomatic cooperation with Russia.

When Syria shot down a Turkish military aircraft on Friday, it was yet another sign that the regional dimension of the uprising against the Assad regime is evolving from a struggle by proxy to open hostilities. The challenge for Washington is how best to respond to the crisis at a time when strong support for Turkey may endanger closer diplomatic cooperation with Russia.

Although details of the incident remain unclear, the heart of the matter is that a Turkish fighter briefly flew into Syrian airspace, was subsequently fired on, and crashed into the Mediterranean Sea. It was the latest in a string of incidents over the past few months between Syria and Turkey. As Turkish support for the opposition has increased, Assad's forces have committed a number of shootings across the Turkish frontier and actively backed the Kurdish PYD -- the Syrian branch of Ankara's old enemy, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Even before the jet was downed, Ankara had been asking Washington for greater support in dealing with the threats from Syria. The U.S. response has been to insist that Turkey ask for a consultation under Article 4 of the NATO charter, which concerns threats to a member state's "territorial integrity, political independence, or security." That fateful meeting will finally happen tomorrow as a result of Friday's incident.

Washington's dilemma is simple: over the past week, it has invested considerable time and effort talking with Russian representatives in Geneva, where officials are assessing the purpose and modalities of a "Contact Group" of countries to find a political solution to the Syria crisis. On one hand, if Washington does not back Turkey sufficiently, it will signal to Bashar al-Assad that downing NATO aircraft will not cost him militarily. On the other hand, if the United States expresses unqualified public support for Turkey, and if NATO announces or even hints that it is preparing various contingencies for Syria (a 180-degree shift from its latest summit in Chicago), then Russian support for the proposed Contact Group could be in jeopardy.

Of course, Turkey itself may have multiple interests at stake in the NATO consultation. Ankara likely views the meeting as a test of its relationship with Washington and key NATO partners as much as a call for allied support against Damascus. Ankara does not appear to be chomping at the bit for confrontation with Syria, but Turkish leaders would surely like to know whether the alliance is ready to back it should such conflict ensue. Based on today's comments by EU leaders, NATO support is qualified at best.

Solving this dilemma requires that Washington get its priorities straight. U.S. policy clearly states that the solution to the crisis is in line with that of the vast majority of Syrians -- Assad has to go. Although avoiding full-blown civil war should be a consideration in how Washington pursues his departure, it is not a goal in of itself. Forcing his ouster via diplomacy alone is a long shot at best, even with Moscow's help. To increase the chances of diplomatic success while preparing for the steady worsening of the conflict (a well-established trend since the uprising began), Washington should openly state its options for "Plan B" during the NATO meeting, and its willingness to exercise them.

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