

The PKK Could Spark Turkish-Russian Military Escalation

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Russia and Syria's dormant ties with the group have been reawakened by the civil war, raising the prospect of dangerous weapons proliferation and potential escalation into direct conflict with Turkey.

On May 14, media close to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) posted video of one of the group's members downing a Cobra helicopter over southeastern Turkey using a Russian-made man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS), which he fired from the Iraqi border region. The incident followed the downing of three Assad regime aircraft in Syria over the past two months by Turkish-supported opposition groups. And on April 27, a Russian official publicly warned that Moscow would arm the PKK with MANPADS to shoot down aircraft over eastern Turkey if Ankara allowed such weapons to reach Syrian opposition groups.

These incidents indicate an incremental escalation in Moscow and Ankara's festering proxy war in Syria and Iraq. If current diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian conflict fail to yield a viable transition plan, the MANPADS problem could intensify quickly, making for a hot summer during an unorthodox U.S. presidential election cycle.

SHOOTDOWNS IN TURKEY AND SYRIA

The AH-1W helicopter in question was downed on May 13 over Turkey's Hakkari province, after being struck with a 9K38 Igla MANPADS (NATO designation SA-18 Grouse) that appeared to be fired from a border hotspot near the Turkish city of Cukurca. The use of the Grouse raised eyebrows because the PKK had previously managed to down only two Turkish helicopters in twenty years using less accurate weapons (an SA-7 MANPADS in 1997 and an RPG-7 in 2008). The source of the Grouse is unknown, though al-Monitor and other outlets have reported Syrian opposition forces looting Assad regime stockpiles of the system over the past few years.

The incident's timing raises more questions than answers given the recent downing of three Syrian aircraft under disputed circumstances. On March 13, two Syrian opposition groups close to Turkey, Jaish al-Nasr and Jaish al-Islam, separately claimed credit for hitting a regime MiG-21 over Kafr Nabudah. There are conflicting accounts on whether it was shot down with anti-aircraft guns or MANPADS -- both rebel groups claimed to use the former, but the Russian Defense Ministry and the Assad regime claimed the latter. Moreover, a video posted by Jaish al-Islam appears to show an explosion consistent with a "small infrared guided missile," according to IHS Jane's.

On April 5, Turkish-supported rebel group Ahrar al-Sham claimed responsibility for downing a regime reconnaissance jet south of Aleppo using anti-aircraft guns, while the regime said that a missile was responsible. As in the March incident, rumors swirled that the weapons used may have been FN-6 Chinese MANPADS originally sold to Sudan but bought and shipped to Syria by an Arab Gulf country.

Then, on April 23, the Islamic State's "Amaq News Agency" claimed that the group had shot down a regime plane and captured the pilot after he crashed east of Damascus. Unlike the previous incidents, Russia did not blame MANPADS but instead reported that the plane crashed due to a "technical fault." Whatever the case, the crash has not yet been corroborated by the Syrian regime or other sources, apart from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

A Russian official soon commented on these incidents at the annual Moscow Conference on International Security. During an April 27 session appropriately titled "Middle East: The Tangle of Contradictions," Duma member and Middle East policy expert Semyon Bagdasarov said that if Washington and its allies proceed with "Plan B" -- that is, providing MANPADS or similar weapons upgrades to Syrian rebels -- then "the Kurds will receive these weapons also," leading to attacks on Turkish aircraft. Although other Russians in attendance brushed off his statements as hyperbole, the PKK's successful use of a Grouse two weeks later indicates that the proxy war he described may in fact be heating up, most likely in anticipation of a breakdown in the ongoing Geneva peace talks. It is also noteworthy that some of the aircraft Russia removed from Syria on March 15 were systems susceptible to MANPADS such as the FN-6, and that attack helicopters subsequently deployed in central Syria have countermeasures to deal with such weapons.

RUSSIAN-PKK TIES

The PKK's role in potential Turkish-Russian escalation should be viewed through the lens of Moscow's deep historic ties with the group -- and with Damascus. In the 1970s, the PKK was established with Soviet support in the Beqa

Valley of Syrian-occupied Lebanon. As one of two NATO countries boasting a land border with the Soviet Union, Turkey was considered Moscow's soft underbelly during the Cold War, providing Washington with numerous assets such as listening bases capable of intercepting communications across the Black Sea. The Russians saw the PKK as a means of undercutting a key U.S. ally.

The PKK also enjoyed support from Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz, who cast his regime as the champion of Turkish Kurds despite oppressing Syria's own Kurdish community. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan lived in Damascus while his group ran training camps in Lebanon and used Syrian territory to attack Turkey.

Moscow's support for the PKK eventually dissipated with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of pressing political and economic problems at home. Syria ended its own support in 1998, after Ankara threatened Damascus with war for supporting what had become a terribly destructive PKK campaign throughout Turkey. As part of this abrupt shift, Hafiz al-Assad expelled Ocalan.

Yet the Syrian civil war reawakened these ties with the PKK. First, as the uprising escalated in 2011, the Assad regime promised to give citizenship to approximately 300,000 Syrian Kurds who had been made stateless by a bogus 1962 census. He also promised to reverse the regime's longtime Arabization efforts in Kurdish areas along the border by granting them greater autonomy, giving the PKK latitude to later declare the formation of a string of northern enclaves alternately called "Rojava" or "Western Kurdistan."

More important, the war has spurred the Russians to rejuvenate their ties with both the PKK and its Syrian Kurdish ally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Following Turkey's November 2015 shutdown of a Russian military jet that had entered its airspace, Moscow began providing weapons to the PYD's Afrin enclave in western Syria. It also provided air support to PYD forces when they captured parts of the Azaz corridor from Turkey-backed rebels. The PYD has even opened an office in Moscow, and Russia has reportedly offered to grant formal recognition to Rojava.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

For now, there is no concrete evidence that Russia is sending weapons to the PKK. Yet if Turkey and its Gulf partners continue to undermine Russian goals in Syria by arming the rebels with more potent weapons -- particularly in the aftermath of a negotiated settlement -- Moscow could decide to provide direct military assistance to the group. Supporting the PKK could also allow Moscow to exploit recent political strife in Turkey. On May 20, the Turkish parliament voted to lift the legal immunity of various deputies, particularly those representing the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), paving the way for their potential expulsion on charges of alleged support for the PKK ([see PolicyWatch 2620, "Erdogan's Nationalist Path to a Full Presidential System"](#)). This development will add to the instability in Turkey's Kurdish-majority provinces. Moreover, any expelled HDP deputies might form a Kurdish "parliament in exile" in Rojava, placing themselves under Russia and the PYD's aegis in Syria. Such a scenario would open the Pandora's box of wider Russian patronage to Syrian and Turkish Kurds, including the PKK.

In light of these factors and the deteriorating military situation near Aleppo, Washington should discourage the Syrian opposition and the PYD/PKK from using MANPADS. But in the absence of progress in Geneva, such weapons may be the inevitable next step in a long war of attrition. In the short term, Washington should remind the rebels that greater use of such weapons could lead Assad and his Iranian and Russian backers to escalate, either by giving similar weapons to the PKK or by encircling Aleppo. Absent the establishment of safe areas -- which the Obama administration has repeatedly said "would not solve the problem," most recently on April 18 -- U.S. officials should attempt to convince the Kremlin that greater bombing of opposition areas in Syria or provision of MANPADS to the PKK could pull Turkey into direct conflict with Russia, at which point Ankara would presumably call for NATO assistance. Washington should make clear that this would not be in Moscow's interests.

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