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Why Did Turkey Attack a Russian Plane?

By Philip Giraldi
November 24, 2015

The shooting down of a Russian fighter plane by a Turkish F-16 is an extremely disturbing turn of events.

Turkey claims that the SU-24 aircraft had violated its airspace and had not responded to repeated warnings before the armed response took place. The Russians for their part claim that they were operating in Syrian airspace with the concurrence of the Damascus government. President Vladimir Putin appeared on Russian television shortly after the plane went down and was clearly furious, denouncing a “stab in the back by the terrorists’ accomplices” and warning that there would be “severe consequences.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov cancelled a planned Wednesday visit to talk with his counterpart in Ankara.

The shoot down will have repercussions. It will inevitably involve some kind of response from NATO while also rendering the creation of any grand alliance against ISIS much less likely.

Turkey has produced a map indicating where the violation of airspace allegedly took place. If the map is accurate, it was over a finger of land two miles wide that juts into Syria. The map and Turkish commentary relating to it suggest that the incursion occurred when the Russian plane crossed the border, but there is perhaps inevitably a problem with that account. A fighter traveling at even subsonic speed would have passed over the Turkish territory in roughly twelve seconds, which rather suggests that there would not have been time for any “repeated warnings.”

Then there is the problem with where the plane actually came down. Admittedly the aircraft would not necessarily plummet straight down to mark the spot where it was hit, but the remains appear to have wound up comfortably inside Syria. A video of the plane's downing also seems to show it being hit and then going directly down.

There is also the question of who gave the order to fire—and why. The Turks have been complaining about Russian aircraft coming too close to the border and there has been inflammatory media coverage about alleged bombings of the ethnic Turkish Turkmen tribesmen who live in the area on the Syrian side. But given the political sensitivity of what is occurring along the Turkey-Syria border, one would have to suspect that any decision to take decisive action came from the top levels of the government in Ankara. American, British, French and Russian airplanes are all operating over northern Syria. None of those planes can be construed as being hostile to Turkey while the terrorist and rebel groups have no air forces. Why a relatively minor incursion, if it indeed took place, would warrant a shoot down has to be questioned unless it was actually a Turkish plan to engage a Russian plane as soon as it could be plausibly claimed that there had been a violation of airspace.

Why would the Turks do that? Because Russia is supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, apparently with considerable success, and Turkey has been extremely persistent in their demands that he be removed. Al-Assad is seen by Turkey, rightly or wrongly, as a supporter of Kurdish militancy along the long and porous border with Turkey. This explains why Ankara has been lukewarm in its support of the campaign against ISIS, tacitly cooperating with the terrorist group, while at the same time focusing its own military effort against the Kurds, which it sees as an existential threat directed against the unity of the Turkish Republic.

Would Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan do something so reckless? Only he knows for sure, but if his objective was to derail the creation of a unified front against terrorist and rebel groups in Syria and thereby weaken the regime in Damascus, he might just believe that the risk was worth the potential gain.