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Syrian Jet Incident Ups Turkish-Russian Tensions

By Raniah Salloum

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Moscow is denying that weapons were on board the Syrian Air jet forced to land in Ankara on Wednesday. But the incident is likely to increase tensions between Turkey and Syria. As Putin's cancellation of a Monday visit to Istanbul shows, Turkey's relationship with Russia could also be threatened.

The development must have come as a terrifying surprise for the 35 passengers and crew members. Their jet, a scheduled Syrian Air flight, had barely entered into Turkish airspace on a flight from Moscow to Damascus when it suddenly found itself flanked by two Turkish fighter jets. At 5:15 p.m. local time, Turkish officials forced the aircraft to land in Ankara.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu later declared Turkey had "received information this plane was carrying cargo of a nature that could not possibly be in compliance with the rules of civil aviation." It is believed that the plane was carrying a Russian delivery for Bashar Assad's military.

"We are determined to control weapons transfers to a regime that carries out such brutal massacres against civilians," Davutoglu said. "It is unacceptable that such a transfer is made using our airspace."

This may sound like a new version of the Cold War -- with NATO member Turkey on one side and Russian ally Syria on the other. And it can also be certain that Ankara only forced the plane to land after close contact with its Western allies. It is also likely that the information about "non civilian cargo" on board came from American intelligence.

In recent months, Washington has repeatedly asserted itself in order to stop weapons deliveries to the Syrian regime. In June, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went public about a Russian delivery of combat helicopters that was being shipped to Damascus.

Officials in Moscow declared at the time that the country was not providing new weapons, but was merely fulfilling previous orders under contracts that had been concluded prior to the insurgency. In the end, the US pressure led the British company that insured the ship to repeal its policy because the cargo violated the European Union embargo on weapons deliveries to Syria. And if it now emerges that the jet forced to land in Ankara was in fact carrying Russian weapons, then it will almost certainly prove to be an embarrassment for Moscow.

Conflicting Reports on Plane's Cargo

It is still uncertain what Turkish special units found in the cargo hold of the Syrian Air jet on Wednesday night. Various Turkish media reported investigators had found some 300 kilograms (661 pounds) of military goods on the aircraft. Turkish news channel NTV reported that "rocket parts" had been found, while CNNTurk claimed "communications devices" were on board that were intended for the Syrian military. Without citing a source, Turkish state television TRT reported on Thursday that the intercepted plane had been carrying military communications equipment, news agency Reuters reported. And *Yeni Sefak*, a newspaper close to the Turkish government claimed it had been carrying 10 containers that contained radio receivers, antennas and "equipment that is thought to be missile parts."

The Russian news agency Interfax on Thursday morning cited an unnamed source in a Russian arms exporting agency stating that neither weapons nor military equipment had been on board the plane.

On Thursday, the move to force the plane to land drew criticism from both Syria and Russia. Lebanese broadcaster al-Manar quoted Syrian Transportation Minister Mohammad Ibrahim Said as claiming that the decision to force the plane down had been tantamount to "piracy." And the Foreign Ministry in Moscow claimed in a statement that "the lives and safety of the passengers were placed under threat." The Airbus A320 aircraft had been carrying 17 Russian nationals on board.

Meanwhile, media outlets aligned with the regime concentrated on reports that all passengers were safe after the plane was allowed to continue its flight to Damascus on Wednesday night. On

Wednesday, night, Turkish officials sought to de-escalate the situation. Following [border skirmishes](#) last week, Turkish-Syrian relations are [tenser](#) than ever before during Bashar Assad's 12 years of rule.

In order to prevent provoking a Syrian reaction that could threaten to escalate into mutual reprisals, Ankara has ordered Turkish aircraft to avoid Syrian airspace. A correspondent with the news agency Reuters even observed a Turkish aircraft as it swiftly turned just before reaching the Syrian border.

Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu emphasized he didn't believe the incident would have any influence on Turkish-Russian relations. But that appeared uncertain on Thursday after Russian President Vladimir Putin cancelled a trip to Turkey that had been planned for Monday. Officially, Putin's staff said he had a scheduling conflict that would prevent him from meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, the Russian daily *Vedomosti* quoted an unnamed Kremlin source claiming that Putin did not want to appear to be taking sides in the escalating conflict between Damascus and Ankara.

Efforts to Halt Weapons Deliveries to Syria

The flow of weapons and military equipment to the regime in Damascus has been a major concern for the international community for months now -- a worry that is shared as much by Ankara as it is by Washington. US politicians have applied pressure on Syria's neighbor Iraq to prevent possible weapons deliveries to Assad. In September, the US provided officials in Baghdad with a list of 117 Iranian civil aircraft that it believes are used almost daily to fly weapons and military forces from Tehran to Damascus. Washington also claims that Iranian trucks are being used to transport weapons to Damascus via Iraq. Iran is one of Syria's closest allies, but Tehran is also an ally of Russia.

Washington's efforts to work together with Baghdad on the issue don't seem to be functioning nearly as well as those with Turkey. Although US troops continued to be stationed in Iraq until the end of 2011, Baghdad tends to be more on the side of Assad and the Russians in the Syria conflict. On Oct. 9, Moscow announced that Baghdad would buy more than \$4.2 billion worth of Russian weapons under contracts signed in recent months.

There have also been instances of Iraq cooperating with the Americans. Responding to US pressure, Baghdad last week demanded that an Iran Air flight traveling through Iraqi airspace land for inspection. Officials later declared that nothing illegal had been found on board the aircraft.

There are frequent allegations circulating in Syria that Assad uses Syria Air in order to deliver weapons from Damascus to hard-fought Aleppo because ground routes have become too unsafe for the regime. It has been impossible, however, to confirm such reports.

In its fight against the insurgents, the Syrian military has had to rely heavily on air power. Indeed, the United Nations has frequently condemned the regime for deliberately targeting civilians in air strikes. The Syrian army is also better equipped than the insurgents, who have fewer and very often lighter weapons.

Through its allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, the US has provided support and weapons deliveries to the rebels -- primarily offering Kalashnikovs and munitions. But a recent *New York Times* report noted that Washington has shied away from providing the rebels with anti-aircraft missiles out of concern they might fall into the wrong hands.

So far, an estimated 30,000 people have been killed during the 18-month uprising in Syria, according to Reuters.