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How the Bear copes with the Wolf: Russia and Turkey in Syria

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Turkey and Russia are two of the leading opposing powers facing each other in the background (and now in the foreground) of the Syrian civil strife. What are their fears that have led them to this at times direct and at times indirect collision?

Civil strife in Syria still goes on and an end to it appears to be anything but close. One has to admit that Russia's unwillingness to accept a quick regime transition without some participation of elements of the Assad regime in the new government proved to be a catalyst of developments that, now, at least cast serious doubts on the "Sunni Spring" outcome in the Middle East and affect Turkey in its core politics. Turkey, despite its insistence on supporting the opposition, including its extremist elements, seems to be losing ground. Why were these two states so absolute in supporting different fractions in the Syrian civil war, coming, thus, closer to a head-on collision?

In order to explain Russian stance one should have a look at some rather recent events that took place in western Siberia, a remote place from the strife in Syria. In July 2012, two major incidents took place in Kazan, capital of the Russian federal Sunni Muslim Republic of Tatarstan. The car driven by Kazan's head Mufti Ildus Faizov was blown up resulting in his severe injury, while, almost at the same time, his deputy, Mufti Valiulla Yakupov, was being gunned down by armed assassins.

Both of these men were known for their fierce opposition against radical Islam and for their will to ban Wahhabism in Russian Muslim lands. Head Mufti Ildus Faizov belonged to the Spiritual leadership of Kazan Muslims from 2010, serving as the deputy president and from April of 2011 he became the head Mufti of Tatarstan.

It seems that radical Muslim sentiments were strengthening in Tatarstan, also as a result of an influx of Muslim extremists from Chechnya and other predominantly Muslim provinces of Russia's North Caucasus regions. According to Russian News Agencies, the culprits of the attacks were conservative Muslims who favoured a strict Salafi interpretation of the faith (although the pretext was some issues concerning the organization of Haj trips to Mecca).

These events in the city of Kazan, which happened as "Arab Sunni Spring" was unfolding over Syria, certainly must have rung the alarm in Moscow. About half a year after them (February 2013), in a large-scale operation led by Russian Security forces in St Petersburg, almost 300 hundred Muslims of various nationalities – suspected of jihadism – were arrested, in what seemed to be an operation to clamp down on radical Muslim elements.

Are the Russians preempting any possible "Arab Spring spill-over" (something that could mutate in a Turkic Spring)

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into the Volga basin and Central Asia by holding a firm stance as regards Syria? It is possible. After all, Uzbek president Islam Karimov and Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev seem to be facing health problems, being at the 7th decade of their lives and from what it seems so far, no legitimate heirs of their power are in sight. The presidents' daughters, Gul'nara Karimova and Dariga Nazarbayeva respectively, figure from times to times as the next leaders of their countries, but these are open matters as regards the opposition leaders, especially since power in these countries is based on tribal and clan politics and balances as well as on Islam's political theology.

But why is Turkey so absolute on supporting the opposition, even its most extreme, bloodthirsty expressions, following thus a course that actually engages it into a proxy (to say the least) war with the Russians? It is more than obvious that by becoming the defender and leader of a "democratic" Sunni Islam in the wider Middle East (and that includes Central Asia), Turkey wants to get itself out of the predicament in which it had been brought by its chronic denial to solve its internal democratic problem, the Kurdish issue. By making use of the Neo-Islamist and stealthy Pan-Turk visions of their Prime Minister, some Turkish policy makers actually believe that they can preempt those developments that may lead to an independent Kurdish state and that Turkey can become a necessary ally for some western powers. If the West really wants a conflict with Russia then Turkey becomes invaluable: without it there can not be a connection between the Middle East, the Volga Basin and Central Asia (granted that Caucasus is breached open for the radical Islamic movement).

The truth is that Turkey is serving a meal already served twice or three times in the modern Eurasian politics arena. Islamism, followed by Pan Turkism, was an idea that the British Empire, Imperial Germany and the 3rd Reich tried to manipulate in various phases of their competition. So far it has failed...

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