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Syria's Turkmen rebels, the group at the center of the Russia-Turkey clash

By Ishaan Tharoor

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Syrian Turkmen fighters are seen with an anti-aircraft artillery weapon near the northern Syrian village of Yamadi, close to the border with Turkey, on Tuesday.

The geopolitical stakes are as high as they have been after Turkey appeared to have shot down a Russian Su-24 attack plane that Ankara claimed violated Turkish airspace. The incident, which occurred Tuesday, flared tensions between Turkey and Russia, prompting Russian President Vladimir Putin to deem it a "stab in the back."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the downing of the Russian jet was "fully in lines with Turkey's rules of engagement." He separately also emphasized that Turkey exercised a right to defend "our brothers and sisters — Turkmen," a gesture to a Sunni Muslim minority group living in the borderlands between Syria and Turkey and numbering around 200,000 people, or about 1 percent of Syria's population. (Syrian Turkmen leaders, though, insist that the community's population is far larger — perhaps as much as 3.5 million — with many members having been "Arabized" over the past century.)

The Turkish government has repeatedly expressed concern about the well-being of the Syrian Turkmen (also known as Turkomans), whom they consider ethnic kin. The Turkmen trace their identity to the invasions of the Middle East by Turkic groups from Central Asia, beginning around the 10th century. Their villages in Syria, according to one account, were established by the Ottoman empire in a bid to counter the influence of Arab tribesmen.

Rebel Turkmen factions, Ankara argued, were being unfairly targeted by the Russian military, whose intervention in the Syrian civil war was ostensibly to combat the Islamic State but actually seems to be aimed at buttressing the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Over the weekend, Turkey summoned the Russian ambassador in Ankara to protest Moscow's supposedly "intensive" bombing campaign in areas in Latakia province, in northwestern Syria, where the majority of Turkmen live. Last week, about 1,5000 ethnic Turkmen fled to Turkey amid the escalation of the conflict.

"It was stressed that the Russian side's actions were not a fight against terror, but they bombed civilian Turkmen villages and this could lead to serious consequences," read a statement from Turkey's Foreign Ministry.

On Tuesday, the Turkmen rebels placed themselves in the center of the conflict after claiming to have fatally shot Russian airmen parachuting to earth from their struck aircraft. "Both of the pilots were retrieved dead. Our comrades opened fire into the air and they died in the air," Alpaslan Celik, a deputy commander in a Syrian Turkmen brigade, told Reuters. He was apparently clutching what he claimed was a piece of the airman's parachute.

Russian officials later confirmed that at least one of the pilots was killed by ground fire.

Syrian Turkmen units, thought to have the backing of the Turkish state, were among the first factions to take up arms against the Assad regime. For decades, Damascus's stifling, centralized rule had suppressed the Turkmen's distinct identity. They were quick to join the formal Syrian opposition.

"We want to overthrow Assad's regime and set up a democracy in Syria, where all ethnic and religious groups can live together in peace," Mahmoud Suleiman, a commander of a Turkmen unit, told Agence France-Presse in January 2013. Turkish authorities see the Turkmen brigades

not only as a strategic player in the fight against Assad, but also as an Ankara-friendly bulwark against the advance of the Islamic State militant group, as well as Syrian Kurds, whose main militia is deemed a terrorist organization by the Turks.

Complicating the picture are a number of splinter Turkmen brigades, including one unit allied to the Kurdish forces.