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Russia just dealt a huge blow to Turkey over its downing of a Russian warplane

By *Natasha Bertrand*
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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced on Friday that Russia would be suspending its visa-free travel agreement with Turkey, in light of Turkey's decision to shoot down a Russian warplane earlier this week.

The suspension, which will make it harder for Russians to travel to Turkey, is likely to have a significant negative impact on Turkey's economy.

Russians account for a huge portion of Turkey's tourism industry. About 3.3 million Russian tourists visited Turkey in 2014, the second-largest number of tourist arrivals after Germany and around 12% of total visitors, according to Reuters.

The move comes two days after Russia issued an official travel warning advising its citizens against visiting Turkey. Russian travel agencies have also announced that they will withdraw their business in Turkey until next year, according to a translation by Boris Zilberman, a Russia expert at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

The move marks perhaps the culmination of Moscow's attempts to retaliate against Ankara.

"Absent a clear Turkish apology, Putin had to show toughness and 'react,'" geopolitical expert Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, told BI on Friday.

"But this reaction is carefully measured and not meant to create a tit for tat that becomes dangerous. Russians aren't going to touch gas exports to Turkey. And I don't see military escalation on either side."



On Tuesday, Turkey ordered the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 fighter that Turkey accused of violating its airspace for roughly 17 seconds.

Turkey has defended its decision to down the plane, contending that the plane was in Turkish airspace and had been warned repeatedly before it was shot down by Turkish F-16 jets. Turkey released audio of those warnings on Thursday. But Russian President Vladimir Putin said the plane was destroyed by a Turkish missile while flying in Syrian airspace, roughly a mile from the Turkish border.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called the act "criminal," announcing on Thursday that Russia would place wide-ranging sanctions on "foodstuffs, labor, and services from Turkish companies" in Russia.

The sanctions "could bite into more than \$30 billion in trade ties between the two countries, as police here began seizing Turkish products and deporting Turkish businessmen," Andrew Roth, The Washington Post's Moscow correspondent, wrote on Thursday with Karla Adam.



Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan (2nd R) walks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin prior to their meeting at the Group of 20 (G20) leaders summit in the Mediterranean resort city of Antalya, Turkey, November 16, 2015.

On Thursday, Putin threatened to pull out of the fight against ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, if Turkey downed another Russian jet.

"We are ready to cooperate with the coalition which is led by the United States," Putin said at a news conference on Thursday with French President Francois Hollande, according to The Guardian.

"But of course incidents like the destruction of our aircraft and the deaths of our servicemen ... are absolutely unacceptable."

On Friday, Erdogan reiterated during a speech in Bayburt, in northeast Turkey, that he didn't want Turkey's relations with Russia to suffer.

But, he added: "We very sincerely recommend to Russia not to play with fire."

'Geopolitical games'

Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, accused Turkey on Friday of "playing a game where terrorists are allocated the role of secret allies," adding that Russia was ready to block the Turkish-Syrian border to "eradicate terrorism on Syrian soil."

It is unclear how such a blockage would be enforced, or whether it would involve stationing Russian ground troops at the border.



Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, right, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of Russia, left, and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey.

Russia has accused Turkey of facilitating the Islamic State's rise by purchasing oil stolen and produced by the jihadist group in Syria.

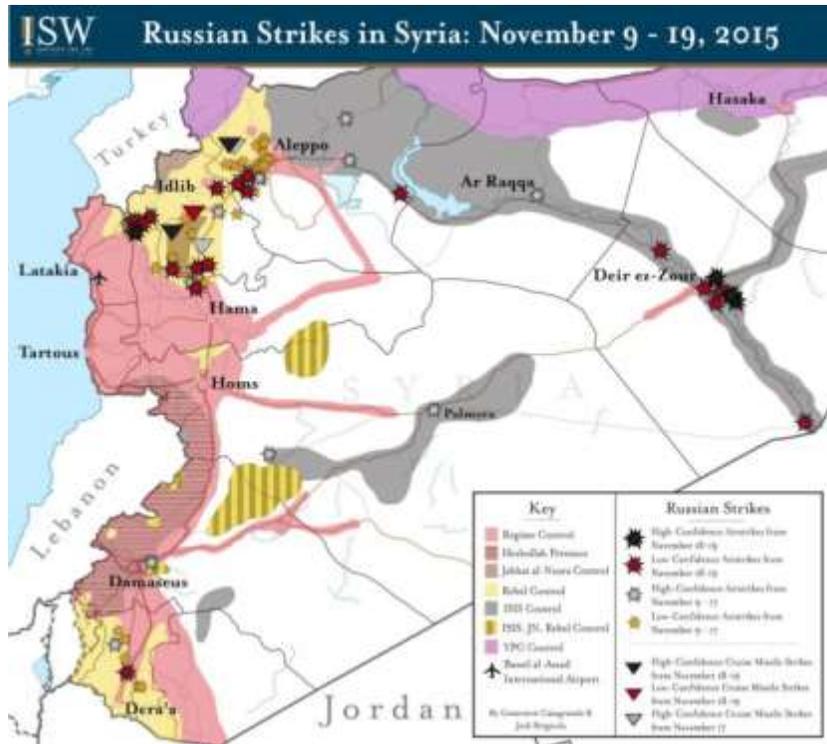
"We established a long time ago that large quantities of oil and oil products from territory captured by the Islamic State have been arriving on Turkish territory," Putin said on Wednesday from the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, before a meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah.

Western officials have long harbored suspicions about Turkey's links to the Islamic State. One official told The Guardian's Martin Chulov in July that a US-led raid on the compound housing ISIS' "chief financial officer" produced "undeniable" evidence that Turkish officials directly dealt with ranking ISIS members, mainly by purchasing oil from them.

Still, those links have never been confirmed — a point Erdogan made as he shot back on Friday, challenging Russia to provide proof that Turkey had ever engaged in financial dealings with ISIS.

Erdogan further accused Russia of supporting what he called the "state terrorism" of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad that has "killed 380,000 people," according to the Turkish state news agency Anadolu.

Russia, a staunch ally of Assad, began launching airstrikes in Syria in late September on behalf of the Syrian government. But the lifelines Russia has thrown to Assad have not been limited to military aid.



On Wednesday, the US Treasury sanctioned Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a former president of the autonomous Russian Republic of Kalmykia, on suspicion of helping Syria's central bank avoid international sanctions.

The Treasury Department also sanctioned Russian-Syrian businessman George Haswani for using his firm, Hesco Engineering and Construction Co., to purchase oil from the Islamic State on behalf of the Assad regime.

In response to the sanctions, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabokov said Washington should stop playing "geopolitical games."

Russian officials complained on Thursday that they had not received a "clear apology" from Turkish officials over the downed plane, adding that they would not communicate with Turkey directly until Ankara apologized.

Though he acknowledged on Thursday that Turkey "may have warned the plane differently" had it known it was a Russian jet, Erdogan has refused to blink first.

"I think if there is a party that needs to apologize, it is not us," he told CNN in an interview from Ankara.

He added: "Those who violated our airspace are the ones who need to apologize. Our pilots and our armed forces, they simply fulfilled their duties, which consisted of responding to ... violations of the rules of engagement. I think this is the essence."