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Russia is already exacting its revenge on Turkey for downing a Russian warplane

Natasha Bertrand

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Just over 24 hours after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane after claiming the jet had violated Turkish airspace, Moscow is already exacting its revenge — albeit subtly.

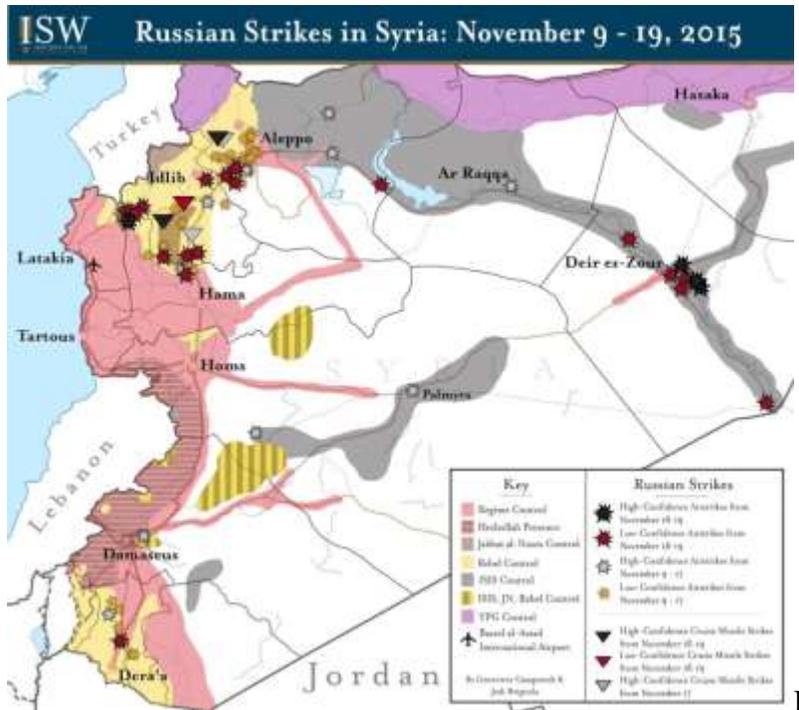
"We're not going to wage a war against Turkey. ... But we will seriously reconsider our agreements with the Turkish government," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a press call on Wednesday, according to The Associated Press.

"Our attitude to the Turkish people hasn't changed," Lavrov continued. "We only have questions about the Turkish leadership."

Turkey defended its decision to down the plane on Tuesday, contending that the plane was in Turkish airspace and had been warned repeatedly before it was shot down by Turkish F-16 jets. 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.

By Wednesday morning, Russia had begun bombarding rebels — including Turkmen insurgents, who have ethnic ties to Turkey — in Syria's Latakia province, ignoring demands made by Turkey over the past week to end its military operations close to the Turkish border.

Russia also announced Wednesday that it would deploy state-of-the-art S-400 missile systems to the Russian Hemeimeem air base near Latakia, Syria — 30 miles south of the Turkish border, the AP reported. The missiles, which are able to hit a plane with extreme accuracy, are evidently meant to deter Turkish jets from shooting down Russian planes in the future.



Additionally, Russia issued an official travel warning advising its citizens against visiting Turkey. And Russian travel agencies announced on Wednesday 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.

Russian tourists account for a huge portion of Turkey's tourism industry — 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.

And in a largely symbolic gesture on Wednesday, the Russian parliament proposed a five-year jail term for anyone who denies that the mass killings of Armenians that began under Ottoman rule in 1915 constituted a "genocide," according to an article translated by Foreign Policy columnist and Russia commentator Julia Ioffe.

Use of the word remains a charged issue in Turkey, which staunchly objects to such a characterization. Eastern Armenia remained part of the Russian Empire until its collapse in 1917.

And there is one other way that Russia could retaliate against Turkey more directly: Namely, by drawing attention to the NATO ally's suspected ties to the Islamic State in Syria.

'Accomplices of terrorists'

As The Soufan Group noted on Wednesday in its daily briefing, Russia "is likely to use intelligence and disinformation to highlight Turkey's dealings with the Islamic State."

Western officials have long harbored suspicions about Turkey's links to the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. 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 — namely, by purchasing oil from them.



Umit Bektas/REUTERS Turkish army tanks take up position on the Turkish-Syrian border near the southeastern town of Suruc in Sanliurfa province, October 6, 2014

Separately, experts, Kurds, and even US Vice President Joe Biden have suggested in the past that Turkey has helped enable ISIS by turning a blind eye to the vast smuggling networks of weapons and fighters during the ongoing Syrian war.

For his part, Biden charged that countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were so focused on ousting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that they did not properly vet the opposition groups to which they sent money and weapons. (He later apologized.)

Turkey joined the US-led anti-ISIS coalition in late July, after a suicide bomber with links to the terrorist group killed 32 activists in the southeastern border town of Suruc. Still, lingering suspicions remained about Turkey's commitment to fighting ISIS, as it embarked on a dual campaign to wipe out a Kurdish insurgency in its southeast.

Those suspicions were all but put to rest last month when an ISIS-linked suicide bomber killed more than 150 people at a peace rally in Ankara — the deadliest terror attack in Turkey's recent history.



But one day after Turkey downed its warplane, Russia has already begun to bring Turkey's murky history with the group back into focus in order to discredit Ankara's role in the anti-ISIS coalition — and legitimize its own.

"Turkey has demonstrated that it is protecting ISIS," Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday on Twitter, adding that the damage from "Turkey's criminal actions ... will be hard to repair."

Medvedev was seemingly echoing a statement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, when he referred to Turkey as "accomplices of terrorists."

"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 from the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi before a meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah.

Lavrov added on Wednesday morning that "terrorists" have been using Turkish territory to plot attacks on other countries, the AP reported. He claimed that the Russian warplane shot down by Turkey had been targeting the extremists' oil infrastructure in Syria.



In any case, this war of words may be as far as Russia is willing to go — for now.

"Putin's initial reaction — calling the incident 'a stab in the back by the terrorists' accomplices' — is about as bellicose as could be imagined. But Putin is no stranger to harsh rhetoric, and he has broader interests to play for," geopolitical expert Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, told Business Insider on Tuesday.

Bremmer noted, however, that the "huge egos" of Turkish President Erdogan and Putin certainly won't help future efforts to mend Turkish-Russian relations.

The Soufan Group largely agreed.

"The most unfortunate consequence will be that Russia will now roll back from its apparent willingness to consider solutions for Syria that do not depend on Assad remaining in power," the group said. "This is a key demand for Turkey, and in the macho world occupied by Erdogan and Putin, neither will want to appear to have blinked first."