

Syria, Russia and Turkey – the uneasy alliance reshaping world politics

Written by Mehmet Ozalp, Associate Professor in Islamic Studies, Director of The Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation and Executive Member of Public and Contextual Theology, Charles Sturt University

The end of the Aleppo crisis and [Syrian ceasefire](#) has produced an unlikely alliance. The relationship between Russia, Turkey and Syria is pivotal not only for the Middle East but also for global geopolitics.

The leaders of all three countries – Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad – rose to prominence unexpectedly at around the same time, accompanied by a level of optimism. But over the past 16 years, they have joined the growing club of populist and authoritarian leaders.

Vladimir Putin first became president of Russia in 2000 – young, energetic and promising to raise Russia from the ashes of the failed Soviet Union.

Erdogan rose to prominence in 2003 after a major economic crisis catapulted him to Turkey's prime ministership, carrying with him the hopes of the Turkish people. His first two terms of government were marked by attempts to join European Union, liberal reforms and economic growth.

Bashar al-Assad replaced his dictator father in 2000. His older brother, who had been expected to take the presidency, died in a car crash in 1994. His youthfulness and Western education gave the impression that he would make Syria more liberal and democratic. However, behind a friendly and liberal facade, Assad continued to run a police state.

At this time Erdogan built a personal friendship with Assad. Erdogan would invite him to have holidays in Turkey, referring to him as “my brother Assad”.

By 2010, Turkey was heralded as a model country where democracy and Islam co-existed. Encouraged by his political success and growing popularity in the Arab world, Erdogan started to show ambitions for the leadership of the Muslim world. He began emulating an EU-like policy, establishing visa-free travel and economic partnerships with other Muslim countries, starting with Syria and Lebanon.

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Between 2004 and 2011, Putin also intensified Russia's relationship with Syria, at the crucial time of the US and international coalition's invasion of Iraq. By 2011, Iraq was destabilised and polarised along Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian lines.

Unhappy with the increasing US and Western influence over Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Putin increased Russia's presence in Syria by developing and enlarging its Tartus naval base and reinforced his ties with Assad.

Then came the [Arab Spring](#) of 2011.

The strategy for Putin was clear: support the Assad regime and from there build up a challenge to the Western dominance over not only the Middle East, but the geopolitical world order. At the same time, this would conveniently divert attention from [growing unrest and protests at home](#) and Russia's aggression in places like Georgia.

In the course of the [Syrian civil war](#), Putin has become the custodian of the Shi'ite alliance between Iran, Syria and Shi'ite political forces in Iraq and Lebanon.

For Erdogan, the Arab Spring meant an acceleration of his ambition to gain leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. His "brother Assad" became enemy number one, as a potential Islamist take-over of Syria suited his leadership vision more than the Shi'ite and secular nature of the Assad regime. Erdogan actively supported a number of Syrian opposition groups with logistical presence in Turkey and a constant flow of resources.

For Erdogan, being anti-Assad also meant being anti-Russian – until four of Erdogan's ministers were hit with [serious corruption charges in 2013](#). In response, Erdogan chose a path of authoritarianism, purging and sacking members of the police and judiciary responsible for the corruption probe.

The narrative was simple: foreign powers (that is, the West) do not want a growing Turkish influence in the region, so they have collaborated with internal forces to overthrow the government. Crucially, this stance signalled Erdogan's departure from the Western bloc.

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Erdogan's relationship with Putin dipped to a new low in 2015 when the Turkish military shot down a Russian fighter jet in Syria. Putin responded with economic sanctions and promoted an international bid [to label Erdogan's government](#) as active supporters of Islamic State (IS).

But an alliance with Russia was essential for Erdogan as he slowly abandoned the Western bloc. In June 2016, Erdogan apologised to Putin and the two men quickly struck a deal that included a partnership to manage the Syrian conflict.

Erdogan's erratic foreign policy and growing authoritarianism were met with a [coup attempt](#) in July 2016. Erdogan survived the attempt and declared it "a gift of God" to cleanse the army and the state of dissidents.

The result was the purging of thousands of government employees, seizing of billion-dollar companies and jailing of more than 120 journalists. This meant [Turkey had jailed more journalists](#) than any other country.

Erdogan swiftly plunged the Turkish army into the Syrian conflict, signalling he was a player in Syria and the region. It was an act that would have been impossible without the Russian alliance. And an alliance with Putin in Syria means support for Assad as Erdogan's relationship boomerang returns to "my brother Assad" mode.

It seems that the fall of Aleppo and the ceasefire is a victory for Putin, Erdogan and Assad, [at least in the short term](#). For Assad, simply being at the international negotiating table is a win. But even if he [regains control of Syria](#), he will have to fight a long battle with Islamic State, similar to the ongoing battles with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Putin will use his expanding influence in the Middle East to weaken Western political and economic influence globally. He will use his relationship with Erdogan's Turkey to weaken NATO and make it irrelevant in a new world order, or disorder, of populist leaders.

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Most interestingly, Erdogan will claim to have brought peace to Syria as the Sunni representative of the trio. His bold efforts [to change Turkey's constitution](#) to bring in an executive presidential system during a state of emergency could only be understood in terms of his strong desire to lead the Muslim world. He wants an uninterrupted rule with no critical dissidence or political challenge so that he can channel all his energy into the greater Middle East.

As the caliphate concoction of IS leader Abu-Bakr Baghdadi wanes, the world may have to come to terms with a caliphate of Erdogan in 2017, the 500th anniversary of Ottoman acquisition of the caliphate from Egypt in 1517.

If Erdogan takes that step, it will throw the region and the world into uncharted territory.

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