

Syria-Turkey Border Incidents

Background:

Turkey experienced a crisis with Syria between 3 October and 4 December 2012 that was precipitated by spillover military action from the Syrian Civil War. Turkey was the only crisis actor, but Syria was also heavily involved as Turkey's adversary during the crisis. The United States was also involved in a notable way due to military support of Turkey, its NATO ally.

Although Turkey-Syria relations have historically been positive, tensions had escalated since the start of Syria's civil war in 2011. Turkey denounced Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's handling of the uprising, and Syria accused Turkey of supporting Syrian rebels. On 22 June 2012, Syria shot down a Turkish Air Force jet near the Turkish-Syrian border. The Syrian military alleged the jet had violated Syrian airspace. However, the Turkish Prime Minister and other spokespersons did not confirm the allegation and emphasized that brief incursions into neighboring airspace by high-speed jets are routine occurrences. The Turkish and Syrian navies conducted a search for the Turkish airmen downed by the incident. In August 2012, Turkey began to hold high-level meetings with the United States on plans to replace the Syrian government.

Summary:

On 3 October 2012, five Turkish civilians in the border town Akcakale were killed by mortar shells fired by Syrian government forces. This triggered a crisis for Turkey. Turkey's major response consisted of at least twelve hours of cross-border artillery fire and a request of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) involvement in the crisis that same day, and the following day Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan requested and received approval from Turkey's Parliament for additional cross-border raids. The US, NATO, and the UNSC quickly condemned Syria's actions, but Erdogan criticized the UNSC for not doing more. Syria apologized over the incident, in part due to Russian pressure. But tensions between Turkey and Syria remained high.

On 10 October, Turkey forced the landing of a passenger plane traveling from Moscow to Syria because the plane allegedly contained weapons. Russia denounced the move, and Syria responded by closing its airspace to Turkish planes on 13 October. Turkey retaliated in kind in the following days.

Cross-border fire continued during the remainder of October and into November. As Syrian government and rebel forces battled for control of border towns, Turkey responded to any stray Syrian shelling with cross-border shelling of its own. Turkey refrained from any airstrikes, and casualties were low, although Ankara did send several fighter jets to the border on 8 November after Damascus launched an air attack against one of its own border towns.

On 21 November, Turkey officially requested that NATO deploy Patriot missiles along the Turkey-Syria border. Turkey insisted that the missiles would be used for defense purposes only. NATO approved the request on 4 December, and the US agreed to send several of its own Patriot missiles as part of the NATO response. Turkey's crisis faded after NATO approved the request.

NATO and the US had an important effect on crisis abatement via the decision to send missiles to Turkey. The missiles were delivered to Turkey after the crisis terminated, in early 2013. The UN's involvement was ineffective.

References:

BBC; CNN; Guardian; International Crisis Group; Keesing's Record of World Events; New York Times; Reuters.