

Russia Sends Ships for Possible Syria Evacuation, Report Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russia has sent warships to the Mediterranean Sea in case it needs to evacuate its citizens trapped by the civil war in Syria, an unidentified naval official was quoted as saying Tuesday.

Their departure points to growing concern in Moscow, a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, about rebel advances on the Syrian capital Damascus and suggests Russia is pressing ahead quickly with evacuation preparations announced by a diplomat last week.

The naval official told Interfax that the five vessels, including two armed landing craft and a tanker, had left a Baltic port on Monday and could be in the Mediterranean indefinitely.

"They are heading to the Syrian coast to assist in a possible evacuation of Russian citizens ... Preparations for the deployment were carried out in a hurry and were heavily classified," he said, adding that any evacuees would be taken to Black Sea ports.

The Defense Ministry declined to comment but referred reporters to a statement on its website that said three vessels had left for the region from the Barents Sea port of Severomorsk and would "carry out tasks to protect civilian shipping."

It was not clear if this was the same group of ships the unidentified official was referring to, or another group sent to offer protection for any operation involving Syria.

There is a Russian naval maintenance base in the Syrian Mediterranean port of Tartus and about 5,300 Russian citizens registered with Russian consular authorities in the country.

In a further indication that Moscow believes an evacuation may soon be required, the head of Russia's paratroopers said his units were ready to take part, Interfax reported.

"With full responsibility I declare: 'We are ready'," Colonel-General Vladimir Shamanov said, according to Interfax.

"The airborne defense troops have experience of such operations, for example evacuating the embassy in Kabul [during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan] ... If we get the order from the defense minister or president, we can carry it out."

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