

Syria Evacuation Could Prove Risky

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The Kremlin's assistance to Russians fleeing Syria on Tuesday marks a turning point in its view of the civil war, representing increasing doubts about Bashar Assad's hold on power and a sober understanding that it has to start rescue efforts before it becomes too late.

The operation has been relatively small-scale, involving less than a hundred people, mostly women and children, but it marks the beginning of what could soon turn into a risky and challenging operation.

Analysts warn that rescuing tens of thousands of Russians from the war-stricken country could quickly become daunting as the opposition makes new advances in the battle against the Syrian president.

"It's a sign of distrust in Assad, who seems unlikely to hold on to power," said Alexei Malashenko, a Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow office. Russia has been Assad's main ally, partnering with China at the United Nations to block international sanctions against his regime. But it has increasingly distanced itself from the Syrian ruler,

signaling that it is resigned to the prospect of him losing power.

Malashenko said the evacuation reflected a strong concern in Moscow that Assad's fall would put Russians in grave danger. "There is a strong likelihood that Assad's foes could unleash a massacre of those whom they see as his supporters," he said.

In addition to tens of thousands of Russians permanently living in Syria, most of whom are Russian women who married Syrian men and have children, there is also an unspecified number of diplomats and military advisers.

Georgy Mirsky, the top Middle East expert at the Institute for World Economy and International Relations, a government-funded think tank, warned that Russians in Syria are facing growing risks.

"Many are reluctant to leave, hoping that the situation could somehow stabilize," he said. "But Aleppo is already half-ruined, and it will soon come to that in Damascus too. Sooner or later, Assad is going to lose."

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