

Russia Sends Three More Warships to Syrian Coast

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The missile cruiser Moskva, part of the Black Sea fleet. **Defense Ministry**

Russia is strengthening its naval presence off the coast of Syria by deploying three more warships to the region, bringing its total fleet in the eastern Mediterranean to 10 vessels.

Admiral Viktor Chirkov said Russia is beefing up its military presence in order to protect against the "slightest threat to national security," BBC Russia reported.

The United States and France also have ships in the region and have been mulling intervention in Syria's civil war.

U.S. President Barack Obama has been advocating for military action to punish Syrian President Bashar Assad, whom he accuses of using chemical weapons against his own people in late August. President Vladimir Putin opposes intervention and has pushed for measures that put Syria's chemical weapons under international control.

The warship movements came as talks between Russian Foreign Minister and U.S. Secretary

of State John Kerry on a diplomatic solution to the dispute entered their second day.

Russia has had seven warships on standby in the Mediterranean since December 2012, including four large landing ships, a destroyer and a frigate. The force will soon be joined by a missile cruiser, the Moskva, the frigate Smetlivy and another landing ship, the Nikolai Filchenkov.

Russia's naval presence has strengthened suspicions that Russia could be helping the Syrian government prepare for a possible attack, though military experts say the ships are too small to provide Assad with heavy weapons like the S-300 missile defense system.

Military expert Viktor Murakhovsky said the fleet's primary objective was most likely keeping track of other countries' forces in the region.

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