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Russian Military Needed in Syria Long Term, Assad Says

By Reuters

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Bashar al-Assad / Kremlin.ru

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said on Thursday Russian forces were needed in the country long-term and for more than just fighting terrorism, Russian news agencies reported, citing an interview with the leader.

"Russian armed forces are needed for balance in our region, at least in the Middle East, until the global political balance changes. And this might not even happen, we do not know. So it is important and necessary," Interfax news agency cited Assad as saying in an interview with Russian media.

He added that Syria's agreement with Russia over the Hmeimim military base was signed to last over 40 years, indicating that the relationship between the two countries was of a long-term nature, Interfax reported.

The rapid return of refugees to Syria is the main issue being discussed between Damascus and Moscow, Interfax news agency cited Assad as saying.

"We call on refugees, especially on Syrians who had businesses here, to return," TASS news agency cited Assad as saying.

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He also commented on the White Helmets volunteers, saying the Syrian rescue workers were a cover for militant groups.

The group, known officially as Syria Civil Defense, has been widely hailed in the West and credited with saving thousands of people in rebel-held areas during years of bombing attacks by Damascus and its allies.

Its members, known for their white helmets, say they are neutral. But Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his backers, including Russia, have dismissed them as Western-sponsored propaganda tools and proxies of Islamist-led insurgents.

"The fate of "White Helmets" is the same as of any terrorist," Interfax cited the Syrian leader as saying.

"They have two options: lay down their arms and use the amnesty, as has been going on for the past four of five years, or be liquidated, like any other terrorist," Interfax quoted Assad as saying.

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