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Putin Eyes Rapprochement Between Syria and Turkey at Assad Meeting

By AFP

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Vladimir Gerdo / TASS / kremlin.ru

Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad for talks on Wednesday as the Kremlin sought to mend ties between Damascus and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The meeting follows the surprise announcement last week of a Chinese-brokered re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Middle Eastern rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Ties between Erdogan and Assad were severed after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and a successful Kremlin mediation would lend Putin much-needed diplomatic kudos at a time when Russia is increasingly isolated over its invasion of Ukraine.

"We are in constant contact and our relations are developing," the Russian leader told Assad at the televised start of their meeting, hailing "significant results in the fight against

international terrorism."

Assad, who arrived in Moscow on Tuesday, voiced support for Moscow's military campaign in Ukraine and said the visit would mark "a new facet" in his country's ties with Moscow.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters earlier that the talks would focus on bilateral ties but said that "Turkey-Syria relations will certainly be touched upon in one way or another."

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The start of Syria's civil war in 2011 strained relations between Damascus and Ankara, which has long supported rebel groups opposed to Assad, and led Turkey to sever diplomatic ties with Syria soon after the war began.

Analysts say Moscow now wants to bridge the divide between the two countries, both of whom see Washington-backed Kurdish groups in northern Syria as a common "enemy."

Erdogan has indicated he could meet with Assad, and their defense ministers met in Moscow in December, in the first such talks since the Syrian war began.

Diplomats from Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran are due to meet in Moscow this week to pave the way for a foreign ministers' meeting, according to Turkish media.

Complex questions need to be resolved, however, particularly around the presence of Turkish troops in northern Syria.

Assad's government has been politically isolated since the start of the war, but he has been receiving calls and aid from Arab leaders after a February earthquake that killed tens of thousands in Turkey and Syria.

"The Syrian people faced another very serious problem, a catastrophe, an earthquake... As true friends, we are trying to support you," Putin said at the start of their meeting on Wednesday.

After the quake, Putin offered Russian aid to Turkey and Syria.

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