The Moscow Times
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How Russia Is Reacting to the Downfall of Syria's Assad

December 08, 2024



Syrian opposition fighters celebrate after the Syrian government collapsed in Damascus, Dec. 8. **AP Photo / Omar Sanadiki / TASS**

Islamist-led rebels in Syria announced they had seized Damascus in a swift offensive on Sunday, forcing President Bashar al-Assad to flee the country and bringing an end to five decades of Baath rule in Syria.

President Vladimir Putin, who helped Assad to stay in power when Moscow intervened in Syria's civil war in 2015, has yet to comment on the events.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Sunday it was "closely following the dramatic events in Syria" and urged everyone "to refrain from using violence and resolve all issues through political means."

"As a result of recent negotiations between B. Assad and several participants in the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, he made the decision to resign from the presidency and leave the country, instructing a peaceful transfer of power," the ministry said, adding that

Moscow was not involved in the negotiations.

Russia also said that it “is in contact with all factions of the Syrian opposition.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia's position was outlined by the Foreign Ministry.

The Russian Embassy in Syria told the state-run TASS news agency that all its staff members were safe following the offensive.

"We are fine," an embassy staff member told TASS without providing more details.

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Senator Konstantin Kosachev said the main priority for Moscow is “to ensure the safety” of Russian citizens in Syria.

"If the Syrian people continue to require our support, it will be provided. However, it is unlikely to extend to the conditions of a full-scale civil war. Syrians will have to handle that on their own," Kosachev said.

"For us, as Russians, the primary task is to ensure the safety of our compatriots and civilians, including diplomats and their families, as well as, of course, the military personnel who are there for the sake of Syria,” Kosachev said, also referring to personnel at Russian military bases in Syria.

Russia has two strategically important military facilities in Tartus and Khmeimim which are used as repair hubs and staging posts to transfer its military contractors in and out of Africa.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Sunday that “Russian military bases in Syria are on heightened combat readiness.”

On Saturday Russia held talks with fellow Assad ally Iran and opposition supporter Turkey in Qatar, aimed at preventing Syria from collapsing into chaos after the insurgent offenses.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Saturday that Syria must not be allowed to fall into the hands of a "terrorist group," referring to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamist group that has headed the assault and is rooted in the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. HTS has sought to soften its image in recent years but remains proscribed as a "terrorist organization" by Western governments.

HTS took Damascus on Sunday.

AFP contributed reporting.

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