

Russian Diplomats Make First Syria Visit Since Assad's Fall

By [AFP](#)

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The Airport in Damascus, Syria. [EPA / TASS](#)

The first official Russian delegation to visit Syria since the toppling of long-term Moscow ally Bashar al-Assad has arrived in Damascus, state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported on Tuesday.

The visit comes as Moscow is keen to secure the fate of two military bases in the country, and after Russian President Vladimir Putin denied that Moscow had suffered a strategic “defeat” in the Middle East following the fall of Assad.

The Russian delegation, which is due to meet the new leadership of the war-ravaged country, included Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Putin's special envoy on the Middle East and Africa, as well as Alexander Lavrentyev, the president's special envoy on Syria, RIA Novosti reported.

Moscow was one of Assad's key backers, intervening in Syria's civil war in 2015 in his favor.

He and his family fled to Russia after his ouster by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Turkish-backed rebel group formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Russia is now seeking to secure the fate of its naval base in Tartus and its air base at Khmeimim with the new Syrian authorities. The two bases on Syria's Mediterranean coast are Moscow's only military outposts outside the former Soviet Union.

A report by RT Arabic, a Russian state-controlled TV channel, said the delegation is set to meet Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani and other officials.

Russia's Bogdanov was a diplomat in Syria in the 1980s and 1990s and speaks Arabic, according to the foreign ministry website. Lavrentyev took part in previous negotiations with Assad.

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Sharaa is the leader of HTS, which is banned in Russia as a “terrorist” organization.

The organization is rooted in Al-Qaeda's Syria branch but has more recently adopted a more moderate tone.

According to RT Arabic, Bogdanov described the visit as aimed at strengthening historic ties based on shared interests, and underlined Russia's hopes for Syrian unity and independence.

Sharaa in December noted the “deep strategic interests between Russia and Syria” in an interview with the Al-Arabiya TV channel.

“All Syria's arms are of Russian origin, and many power plants are managed by Russian experts... We do not want Russia to leave Syria in the way that some wish,” Sharaa added.

Ukrainian diplomats visited Syria's new rulers in December, with Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga urging Sharaa to expel Russia from the country.

“We believe that from a strategic point of view, the removal of Russia's presence in Syria will contribute to the stability of not only the Syrian state, but the entire Middle East and Africa,” Sybiga told Sharaa while in Damascus, according to a statement.

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The Russian delegation's visit comes amid a flurry of diplomatic activity by the new rulers, aimed at building ties and easing sanctions.

EU foreign ministers on Monday agreed to begin easing sanctions on Syria, starting with key sectors such as energy.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Friday stressed the importance of “ensuring that the new government prevents Syria from becoming a source for international terrorism” and “denying foreign malign actors the opportunity to exploit Syria’s transition.”

Saudi Arabia’s top diplomat, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, was received by Sharaa on Friday, making his first visit since Assad’s overthrow.

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