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Syria’s New Leadership Urges Russia to ‘Address Past Mistakes’ in First Talks Since Assad’s Ouster

By AFP

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Leo Correa / AP / TASS

Syria's new leadership on Wednesday called on Moscow to "address past mistakes" during talks with visiting Russian officials — the first such meeting since Kremlin ally Bashar al-Assad was ousted last month.

The visit comes as Russia seeks to secure its military presence in Syria, while President Vladimir Putin has denied that Assad's removal represents a strategic defeat for Moscow in the Middle East.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said he and his delegation met for three hours with Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani.

"The new administration... stressed that restoring relations must address past mistakes,

respect the will of the Syrian people and serve their interests," Syria's leadership said in a statement.

The talks also covered "justice for the victims of the brutal war waged by the Assad regime," it added.

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Russia's Foreign Ministry described the visit as a "crunch point" in relations between Moscow and Damascus, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov calling it an "important trip."

"It is necessary to build and maintain a permanent dialogue with the Syrian authorities, which is what we will continue to do," Peskov told reporters in Moscow.

Peskov declined to comment on reports that Syria's new rulers had requested Assad's extradition and sought compensation from Moscow. The former president fled to Russia with his family in December following a rapid rebel advance.

Bogdanov, who also serves as Putin's special envoy on the Middle East and Africa, was joined by Alexander Lavrentyev, the president's special envoy on Syria, the Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported.

It noted that this was "the first visit by Russian officials to Damascus" since Assad's departure.

Moscow was one of Assad's key backers, intervening militarily in 2015 to support his regime during Syria’s civil war.

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Russia is now working to maintain control of its naval base in Tartus and air base in Khmeimim — its only military facilities outside the former Soviet Union — under Syria's new leadership.

Sharaa leads Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist group banned in Russia as a "terrorist" organization. Originally rooted in Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, HTS has since adopted a more moderate stance.

RT Arabic reported that Bogdanov framed the visit as an effort to strengthen historic ties based on shared interests, underscoring Russia's stated commitment to Syria's unity and independence.

In a December interview with Al-Arabiya, Sharaa highlighted the "deep strategic interests between Russia and Syria."

"All Syria's arms are of Russian origin, and many power plants are managed by Russian

experts," he said. "We do not want Russia to leave Syria in the way that some wish."

Meanwhile, Ukraine is pushing for Moscow's military expulsion. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga visited Damascus in December, urging Sharaa to remove Russian forces.

"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 said in a statement.

The Russian delegation's visit to Syria this week comes amid a diplomatic flurry by the country's new rulers as they seek to build international ties and ease sanctions.

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

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Friday emphasized the need to prevent Syria from becoming a hub for international terrorism and to block foreign actors from exploiting its transition.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan also met with Sharaa on Friday, marking his first visit since Assad's overthrow.

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