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Syria Could Let Russia Keep Air and Naval Bases, New Defense Minister Says

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Russia's Khmeimim airbase in Syria. **kremlin.ru**

Syria's new government is open to allowing Russia to keep its strategic military bases in the country after the ouster of Kremlin ally Bashar al-Assad, Defense Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra told The Washington Post on Thursday.

Russia's longtime ally Assad was overthrown in a shock rebel offensive in December, bringing the future of Moscow's Tartus Naval Base and Khmeimim Air Base into question.

According to Abu Qasra, Syria would consider allowing Moscow to keep the bases as long as the deal served Damascus' interests.

"If we get benefits for Syria out of this, yes," he said.

The statement marks a major shift in the stance of Syria's new leadership — who until recently had been under Russian bombardment — toward Moscow.

Russia's stance toward the new Syrian government, too, has "improved significantly" since

Assad's overthrow in December, Abu Qasra told The Washington Post.

“In politics, there are no permanent enemies,” Abu Qasra said of Russia.

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Syria's new leadership in January called on Moscow to "address past mistakes" during talks with visiting Russian officials.

Syrian media reported that month that the country’s new government had terminated a treaty granting Russia a long-term naval presence at the port of Tartus.

The Tartus Naval Base and Khmeimim Air Base, Russia's only military bases outside the former Soviet Union, are key to Moscow's activities in Africa and the Middle East.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who ordered military intervention in Syria in 2015 to bolster Assad’s regime during the country’s civil war, has sought to downplay the fall of Assad. Putin claimed that Russia had achieved its objectives in Syria despite the regime change.

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