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Russia and Syria Signal Closer Ties Amid Uncertainty Over Military Bases

By AFP

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Syria's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. **Sergei Bulkin / TASS**

Russia and Syria signaled Thursday that they intend to strengthen ties and review bilateral agreements signed under former President Bashar al-Assad, amid growing questions about the future of Moscow's military presence in the country.

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani appealed for continued Russian support during talks in Moscow, his first official visit to the country since Assad was ousted in a surprise rebel offensive last year. Assad is believed to have fled to Russia following his fall from power.

"Of course, we are interested in having Russia by our side," al-Shaibani told Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Russia maintains a naval facility in Tartus and an air base at Hmeimim, its only official

military outposts beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. The two bases, located on Syria's Mediterranean coast, played a key role in Moscow's military intervention in support of Assad during the country's civil war.

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It remains unclear whether Syria's new Islamist-led government will allow Russia to retain its military foothold. The current lease agreement for the bases runs through 2066, but neither side mentioned their status during Thursday's press conference.

Lavrov said Moscow was ready to assist Syria in post-war reconstruction efforts and expressed openness to reviewing existing "agreements and contracts concluded under different conditions."

Al-Shaibani echoed that position, saying a reassessment was necessary to determine whether those agreements "serve the interests of the Syrian people."

Syria needs "friends and partners on its path forward," he said.

Lavrov, for his part, insisted that Russia's support for Syria "doesn't depend on the political situation or changes in government."

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