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Russia strives to retain its military bases in Syria

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On 28 January, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and the President's Special Envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, held talks in Damascus with Ahmad ash-Shar'a, head of the new Syrian government, and Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani. The Russian side declared its support for the changes taking place in Syria, expressed its willingness to enhance cooperation, and signalled its readiness to assist in the country's reconstruction. The Syrian side raised the issue of reparations for the involvement of Russian armed forces in the civil war on Bashar al-Assad's side, as well as the extradition of Assad himself and, potentially, other officials from his regime to the new authorities.

This was the first official visit of a Russian delegation to Syria since the fall of the Assad regime, which had been backed by Moscow, and the takeover of power by the Sunni Islamist group HTS. Almost immediately after Assad's downfall, the Kremlin suggested its willingness to establish contact with Syria's new leadership and explore areas of cooperation. Both sides announced plans to continue talks, particularly regarding the future of Russian military bases, which Moscow aims to retain.

Commentary

- **Russia expects the Syrian authorities to recognise that maintaining relations with Moscow is in their interest, as this would help reduce their dependence on Turkey and Qatar.** The Kremlin hopes that Damascus will seek potential support from Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, in securing international legitimacy. Additionally, Moscow aims to cooperate with the new leadership on reaching an arrangement with the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), which, with US backing, control economically significant areas in northeastern Syria.
- **Moscow's top priority is retaining its military bases in Syria** – the naval facility in Tartus and the air base in Khmeimim. The Tartus base serves as a logistical hub for Russia's permanent Mediterranean squadron, established in 2013, while Khmeimim is a key transit point for Russian operations in Libya and the Sahel, where Moscow has successfully expanded its influence at the expense of Western powers in recent years (notably in the Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso). Under agreements signed in 2017, Russia has the right to use these bases free of charge for 49 years, with an automatic 25-year extension. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, Moscow publicly proposed repurposing the bases as hubs for delivering and distributing humanitarian aid. The 2017 agreements contain several highly favourable provisions for

Russia, particularly regarding immunity for its personnel and customs regulations.

- **Russia is not prepared to acknowledge Syria's claims for compensation over the destruction caused by Russian armed forces.** However, it may agree to special discounts ongoods and services it might supply, such as agricultural products or crude oil. At the same time, Syria's demands to revoke asylum for Assad and his associates conflict with the Kremlin's long-standing principle of not extraditing its political clients. They also contradict Vladimir Putin's personal aversion to prosecuting former dictators who have been removed from power.