

# Putin Weighs In on the Syrian Situation

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*Russian **President Vladimir Putin**, during his [Results of the Year](#) annual marathon year-end interactive televised discussion with the Russian public and the media in Moscow on December 19, spoke at some length on the recent developments in Syria.*

These were Putin's first public remarks on the topic and, coming 12 days after armed opposition forces seized Damascus and the exile of former president Bashar al-Assad and his family in Moscow, they signified that the Kremlin is recalibrating its compass of West Asian strategies.

Putin disclosed that he will soon have a meeting with Assad, signalling a level of transparency that is very rare in international diplomacy in comparable volatile circumstances. We still do not know, for instance, what happened to Afghan president **Ashraf Ghani** after the Taliban takeover four years ago, or whether **President Joe Biden** even showed the courtesy to receive America's fallen ally — and an erstwhile proxy at that.

Putin sees no reason to feel ashamed or petrified over the regime change in Syria. Russia's mission in Syria was to decimate the US-sponsored extremist groups destabilising that country and the region as part of a regime change project. And that enterprise has been hugely successful as Russia inflicted a crushing defeat to the American project. The Russian mission in Syria never had a hidden agenda to prop up the Syrian regime. As Putin explained, Russian ground forces were never deployed or involved in the fighting in Syria.

The speed with which Assad was given asylum in Moscow and the peaceful transfer of power in Damascus hinted that the Kremlin was not taken by surprise. Again, compare the [chaotic and desperate US evacuation](#) on August 16, 2021 from Kabul airport with Afghans falling from the sky as American military planes took off. Yet, western propaganda is painting the town red that Russia has been "defeated" in Syria!

The narrative by Turkish foreign minister **Hakan Fidan** seems entirely plausible when he claimed that **at Ankara's urging, Moscow and Tehran counselled Assad to peacefully transfer power**. Fidan disclosed to NTV broadcaster on Dec. 13,

"We spoke with the Russians and Iranians and told them that the man they had invested in was no longer someone worth investing in. They made one phone call, and that evening Assad was gone."

Putin openly acknowledged that Russia keeps contacts with the HTS and their conversation will have a bearing on the fate of the bases in Latakia. Russia is offering that the international community may use the bases to handle humanitarian assistance to Syria.

Conceivably, Turkey, Russia and Iran synchronised their watches. **Tehran disclosed in the weekend that it is reopening the embassy in Damascus** and that the HTS has offered to provide security for the mission's functioning. Through the entire three-and-a-half hour event in Moscow last Thursday, Putin never once voiced any criticism of Turkey's backing for HTS or questioned the legitimacy of Ankara's stated concerns in the Syrian situation — **although he remains sceptical whether the Kurdish nationality question involving 30-35 million ethnic Kurdish population spread over Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran lends itself to a solution.**

Putin asserted that Moscow has already conveyed to the HTS as well as the regional states that the Russian bases are "capable of offering assistance... (and) this was met with understanding and a willingness to collaborate." Putin stressed:

"An overwhelming majority of them have expressed interest in retaining our military bases in Syria."

Putin ridiculed the Biden administration's prognosis that Russia faces "defeat" in Syria. His broad message was that "there will be plenty to discuss" with Trump when they meet, implying that Biden Administration is no longer consequential to Syria's future. The Biden Administration's efforts to rally the Arab states have failed to gain traction as the trust deficit is formidable. Arabs suspect that the US' continued illegal occupation has ulterior motives.

Indeed, a new matrix is appearing, as Biden administration's obsession shifts to creating a quagmire in the Middle East for the incoming Trump administration. In a somersault on Sunday, the US state department's Assistant Secretary Barbara Leaf landed in Damascus to personally convey the US decision to [scrap the \\$10 million reward for the arrest of HTS leader](#) (Syria's de facto leader) Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, following what she claimed to be "very productive" meetings with the group's representatives.

This abject surrender will now enable Washington to lift the sanctions against Syria per the infamous Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. However, Russia has outmanoeuvred the Biden administration in Syria. Putin implied that a working relationship with the new leadership in Damascus is steadily developing. He said,

"I do not know, we must reflect on how our relations will evolve with the political forces currently in control (in Damascus) and those that will govern this country in the future -- our interests must align. Should we remain, we must act in the interests of the host nation."

Putin noted:

"What will those interests entail? What can we do for them? These questions demand careful consideration on both sides. We are already capable of offering assistance, including utilising our bases... while challenges remain, our position firmly aligns with international law and the sovereignty of all nations, including respect for Syria's territorial integrity. This extends to supporting the stance of the current authorities governing the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic. In this regard, we stand with them."

This is a big statement and it will resonate across the Arab world. Make no mistake, Russia's transition from the Assad era is well under way. The contours of a pragmatic policy

approach are emerging. Russian intelligence would have done the spade work in this transition.

Putin remarked tauntingly that

“the groups that were fighting against the Assad regime and the government forces back then have undergone internal changes. It is not surprising that many European countries and the United States are trying to develop relations with them now. Would they be doing this if they were terrorist organisations? This means that they have changed, doesn't it? So, our goal (Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015) has been achieved, to a certain degree.”

From behind the scene, Turkey is tacitly encouraging Russia's partnership with HTS. Significantly, Putin dwelt on the ramifications of the Kurdish problem where Turkey may need Russia's cooperation to navigate the tricky pathway going forward.

Turkey's concerns have four main templates: one, ensure Turkey's border security with Syria; two, create conditions for the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey; three, push Syrian Kurdish forces away from the border regions; and, four, counter the covert European and US-Israeli support for an independent Kurdish state. Putin underscored “the gravity of the Kurdish issue.” There is no conflict of interests here between Turkey and Russia.

While Putin spoke with understanding and some sympathy for Turkey's legitimate concerns, he did not mince words to condemn Israel's naked land grab in Syria. In his words, “I believe that the main beneficiary of the developments in Syria is Israel... In the Golan Heights, Israel has advanced along the front by 62-63 kilometres and to a depth of 20-25 kilometres. They have occupied fortifications originally built for Syria by the Soviet Union, strong defensive structures comparable to the Maginot Line.

“It seems there are already several thousand (Israeli) personnel stationed there. It appears not only that they have no intention of leaving, but they may also be planning to further reinforce their presence.”

Putin warned that “further complications down the line” are to be expected, as the Israeli occupation could “ultimately result in the fragmentation of Syria.” In this regard, Russia shares the same perception as Turkey, Iran and the Arab states.

Interestingly, Putin exuded confidence that Russia is on the right side of history with a policy reset that aims to harmonise with Turkey and Iran as well as the Arab states. Indeed, this diplomatic feat enhances Russia's standing in West Asia.

Conversely, to retrench or not in Syria — that's the question that will haunt the Trump presidency. The Pentagon is already pushing back against Trump's statement “we have nothing to do (in Syria).” Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder has revealed that US troop numbers in Syria have reached 2,000 -- more than double the previously reported nine hundred. These troops remain actively deployed with no plans for withdrawal.

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Featured image: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 15. (Vladimir Gerdo, TASS)

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