

Putin Meets With Syrian President Assad in Moscow

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Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad. Valery Sharifulin, TASS / kremlin.ru

President Vladimir Putin met with his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad in Moscow to discuss what the Russian leader described as continued "escalation" in the Middle East, state media reported on Thursday.

The meeting, held late Wednesday, comes at a time when Russia — which saved Assad's government through its military intervention in 2015 during a civil war — seeks to mediate tensions between Syria and Turkey.

A video [published](#) by the Kremlin showed Putin greeting Assad with a handshake in the Kremlin, after which the two leaders sat down before cameras to discuss the situation in Syria and the Middle East.

"Of course, I am very interested in your opinion on how the situation in the region as a whole is developing," Putin told Assad. "Unfortunately, it tends to worsen, we can see that. This also applies to Syria directly."

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It was the first time Putin and Assad met since March of last year, and it comes after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan evoked the possibility of a three-way meeting to try and normalize ties between Ankara and Damascus.

"Now, we have come to such a point that, as soon as Bashar al-Assad takes a step toward improving relations with Turkey, we will show him the same approach," Erdogan said earlier.

Turkey originally sought to topple Assad's regime when the conflict in Syria erupted, leading to the violent suppression of peaceful protesters in 2011, and later, rebels calling for his ouster.

But more recently, Ankara has shifted focus to preventing what Erdogan in 2019 dubbed a "terror corridor" from opening up in northern Syria.

Erdogan has long said he might reconsider ties with Assad as his government is working to ensure the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees.

Turkey has launched a string of offensives in Syria since 2016, targeting Kurdish militias, Islamic State group jihadists and forces loyal to Assad.

Pro-Turkish forces in Syria now control two vast strips of territory along the border.

AFP contributed reporting.

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