

## **Syrian President Assad travels to Moscow, meets Putin**

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**Damascus, Syria:** President Bashar Assad has traveled to Moscow in his first known trip abroad since war broke out in Syria in 2011, meeting his strongest ally Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The two leaders stressed that the military operations in Syria "in which Moscow is the latest and most powerful addition" must lead to a political process.

The visit Tuesday reflects renewed confidence from the embattled Syrian president after Russia and Iran, another staunch ally, dramatically escalated their support recently as Moscow began carrying out airstrikes on Syrian insurgents and Tehran sent hundreds of ground forces.

A Syrian official confirmed Wednesday that Assad had returned to Damascus. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Syria's conflict began in March 2011 after the government cracked down violently on largely peaceful protests against Assad's rule. The protests gradually became an armed insurgency and a civil war that has killed a quarter of a million people in the past five years.

Moscow, a traditional ally of the Assad family, started an air campaign on Sept. 30 against what it said are terrorist groups threatening Syria and Assad's rule. It became the latest international power to deepen its involvement into the increasingly intractable conflict that saw a mushrooming of armed groups, including the Islamic State group and al-Qaida.

Russia says it is targeting militants. But critics including the U.S. say the Moscow military intervention helps props up Assad and is likely to fan the violence.

A statement posted on the Syrian presidency's official Facebook page said Assad met with Putin on Tuesday to discuss the continuation of the military operations against terrorism in Syria. The aim of the military operation is to eradicate terrorism that is obstructing a political solution, the statement said.

The post included a photo of Assad with a wide smile shaking hands with Putin. Russian television showed footage of Putin and Russia's foreign and defense ministers meeting with Assad and his adviser.

Putin thanked Assad for "accepting our invitation and coming to Moscow despite a tragic situation in your country."

Assad praised Russia's anti-terror efforts since the beginning of his country's war. "Terrorism which we see spreading today could have been more widespread and more harmful if it weren't for your decisions and steps, not only in our region," Assad said in remarks carried by Arab media.

"Terrorism is an obstacle to a political solution," the Syrian presidency statement quoted Assad as saying.

Putin added that along with fighting militants, Moscow believes that "a long-term settlement can only be achieved as part of a political process with the participation of all political forces, ethnic and religious groups.

"The Syrian people have been putting up a fight against international terrorism effectively on its own for several years, sustaining sizeable losses but it has achieved positive results recently," Putin said.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, in comments carried by Russian news agencies, declined to comment on any specific outcome of the talks.

A week after Russia launched its airstrikes, Syrian ground troops, aided by allied fighters from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, pushed their way into central and northern Syria in an attempt to drive out rebel and militant groups in control of territories there. So far, Syrian forces have seized a few villages but there has been no strategic victory.

- AP