

Vladimir Putin declares victory in Syria, announces partial pullout of forces

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Moscow: Declaring a victory in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday visited a Russian military air base in the country and announced a partial pullout of Russian forces from the Mideast nation.

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Putin's visit marks his first trip to Syria, drawing a symbolic line under the campaign that has shored up President Bashar Assad's government. It is also the first visit by a foreign head of state to war-ravaged Syria since its bloodletting started nearly seven years ago.

Putin's brief stop at the Hemeimeem air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia while on route to Egypt comes days after the Russian president declared his bid to run for re-election in the March 18 vote, helping encourage the feelings of pride about Russia's revived global clout and prestige.

It also follows the Russian announcement last week that the Syrian army under the Russian air cover routed the Islamic State in eastern Syria and fully restored control over the border with Iraq.

In a televised speech to the Russian troops at the base, the Russian leader hailed their valor.

"You have shown the best qualities of a Russian soldier," Putin said.

The Hemeimeem base, in the heartland of Assad's Alawite minority, has served as the main foothold for the Russian military campaign in Syria.

In a speech to the troops, Putin said that he had ordered the military to withdraw a "significant part" of the Russian contingent in Syria.

"Friends, the Motherland is waiting for you," Putin said. He added that "if the terrorists again raise their heads, we will deal such blows to them they have never seen."

Russian television stations showed Putin walking off the plane, embracing and shaking hands with Assad at the air base.

Putin said that the Russian military will maintain their presence at the Hemeimeem air base and the naval facility in Tartus.

Syrian TV said Assad thanked Putin for his troops' effective contribution to the fight against terrorism in Syria.

Russia launched its air campaign in Syria at the end of September 2015 when Assad's government was teetering on the brink of collapse and quickly changed the course of the conflict in its favor.

- AP