
Putin: Russia may deploy forces back to Syria 'in mere hours' if necessary

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"Of course, if such a need arises, Russia can, in several hours, build up its forces in Syria to a size capable of dealing with an escalating situation and use the entire range of means at its disposal," Putin said.

"We wouldn't like that. A military escalation is not our choice. We hope the parties involved would show common sense and that both the government and the opposition will stick to the peace process," he added.

Putin was summarizing the results of the Russian five-month-long anti-terror campaign in Syria at a solemn ceremony in Moscow.

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The Russian president said Moscow was open in saying from the start of the operation that it was a limited campaign with a set deadline.

"We have created the conditions for a peace process. We have established constructive and positive cooperation with the US and a number of other countries, with respectable opposition forces in Syria, which really want to end the war and find a political solution of the conflict. You, Russian soldiers, paved that way," Putin told the Russian

military personnel who took part in the campaign.

He added that the Syrian Army, with Russia's support, can now hold out against terrorist forces and take back terrorist-controlled territories.

The president acknowledged that the pull-out may be reversed, if necessary, even though Moscow would not want to see such a development. He also stressed that advanced air defense systems deployed in Syria for protection of Russian military sites remain there and would attack any hostile forces threatening them.

"We stick to the fundamental international laws and believe that nobody has the right to violate Syria's sovereign airspace. We have created an effective mechanism for prevention of air incidents with the Americans, but all our partners have been warned that we would use our air defense systems against any target that we considered a threat to the Russian troops," Putin said.

The Syrian operation cost Russia some \$480 million, Putin said, and most of the funding came from the Russian Defense Ministry, which used money allocated for military training in 2015 to foot the bill.
