

Russian Base in Syria, a Symmetrical Strategic Move

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Russian military officials have consistently denied reports that Russia is creating a permanent naval base in Tartus, Syria that would give it a Mediterranean outpost and represent a major shift in the regional security balance of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Levant, and the Middle East as a whole. Reports were emerging long before the Israeli attacks on Lebanon that Russia had begun work on deepening the Syrian maritime port of Tartus, used by the Soviet Union and later Russia as a supply point since the Cold War, and widening a channel in Latakia, another Syrian port. Both Tartus and Latakia are significant for both Syria and Russia in that they face the outlet of the Ceyhan end—the receiving end—of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil terminal giving Russia and its partners the ability to disrupt or secure the port and route during the possibility of the eruption of any future war(s) with the United States.

The establishment of this Russian project has been presented as an alternative hub for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, based in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, in the Ukraine, but this seems to be undermined by upgrading and expansion of the Russian naval port of Novorossysk off the eastern margins of the Black Sea. The creation or expansion of naval or military bases off the Syrian coast and Russian coast off the Black Sea seem to imply the future employment of two different forces with different applications for the national and security interests of Russia.

The Russian expansion of the Tartus would include the installation of an air defence system with S-300 PMU2 Favourite ballistic missile system that would be a virtual threat to the Ceyhan, maritime traffic, the flow of oil, and would provide an air defence shield for vital portions of Syria that are strategically important, especially in the event of a war. In essence Damascus, the Syrian capital, and Syria would be protected from either Israeli or American aerial bombardment. It is clear that the Russian aims in Syria are a symmetrical reaction to American objectives for the Middle East and part of a global chess game.

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