

## Russian Warships to Dock in Syria

Russian military build-up in Mediterranean starts; linked to Iran?

By [Margot Dudkevitch](#)

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In an effort to expand its military presence in the international arena and reestablish a naval presence in the Middle East, Russia has dispatched a naval fleet to the region, including a guided missile cruiser, two anti-submarine ships and 47 fighter planes. The fleet will dock at the Syrian port of Tartus where Russia maintains a technical base. At the same port, Iranian ships are also docked.

Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov told reporters that the expedition "is aimed at ensuring a naval presence and establishing conditions to secure Russian navigations." Serdyukov added that the fleet will conduct tactical exercises with real and simulated launches of sea and air based missiles and intends to call at a number of different ports in the region.

In the past, Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed that Russia would respond in the event Iran was attacked by a foreign power. Boosting Russia's naval presence in the area could well be an attempt to signal to Israel and possibly America that if Iran is attacked, Russia will strike back.

The Russian President has stressed on numerous occasions that he strives to become more involved in the Middle East, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Whether such a large Russian presence docked at the Syrian port, will hamper Israeli navy operations or intelligence gathering missions remains to be seen.

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