

## **Russian parliament give Vladimir Putin OK to use troops in Syria**

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**Moscow:** Russian lawmakers voted unanimously Wednesday to let President Vladimir Putin send Russian troops to Syria.

The Kremlin sought to play down the decision, saying it will only use its air force there, not ground troops.

Putin had to request parliamentary approval for any use of Russian troops abroad, according to the constitution. The last time he did so was before Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March 2014.

The Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, discussed Putin's request for the authorization behind closed doors Wednesday, cutting off its live web broadcast to hold a debate notable for its quickness.

Sergei Ivanov, chief of Putin's administration, said in televised remarks after the discussion that the parliament voted unanimously to give the green light to Putin's plea. The proposal does not need to go to another legislative body.

Ivanov insisted that Moscow is not going to send ground troops to Syria but will only use its air force "in order to support the government Syrian forces in their fight against the Islamic State" group.

Putin and other officials have said Russia was only providing weapons and training to Syrian President Bashar Assad's army to help it combat the Islamic State group. Recent satellites images, however, have shown giant Russian military cargo planes in Syria, and Russian navy transport vessels have been shuttling back and forth for weeks to ferry troops, weapons and supplies to Syria.

Putin said in a CBS interview earlier this week that Russia won't take part in any troop operations in Syria.

Worried by the threat of Russian and U.S. jets clashing inadvertently over Syrian skies, Washington agreed to talk to Moscow on how to "deconflict" their military actions.

Last week, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter had a 50-minute phone call with his Russian counterpart, the first such military-to-military discussion between the two countries in more than a year.

Israel has taken similar precautions, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visiting Moscow last week to agree with Putin on a coordination mechanism to avoid any possible confrontation between Israeli and Russian forces in Syria.

Moscow has always been a top ally for Assad. The war in Syria against his regime, which began in 2011, has left at least 250,000 dead and forced millions to flee the country. It is also the driving force behind the record-breaking number of asylum-seekers fleeing to Europe this year.

Ivanov told reporters that Russia decided to help Assad in order to protect its own country from Islamic militants, not because of "some foreign policy goals or ambitions that our Western partners often accuse us of."

"We are talking about Russia's national security interests," Ivanov said, adding that Moscow is worried about the growing number of Russian recruits going off to fight for the Islamic State group — a number he said was in the thousands.

Moscow should "take pre-emptive steps and do it on distant frontiers, instead of facing the issue here and later on," said Ivanov.

Putin's troop request comes after his bilateral meeting Monday with President Barack Obama on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York, where the two discussed Russia's recent military buildup in Syria.

Ivanov said the motion comes after Moscow received a request from Assad asking for help. He said the biggest difference between other countries conducting air strikes in Syria—such as the United States—is that "they do not comply with the international law, but we do."

Putin hosted a meeting of the Russian security council at his residence Tuesday night outside Moscow to discuss terrorism and extremism, the Kremlin also reported.

Pundits in Moscow said Russia's decision was unlikely to take the U.S. by surprise.

"Putin has suggested to Obama that Russian air force take a certain role in the coalition," Ekho Moskvyy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov, who covered Putin's visit to New York, said Wednesday.

"This didn't work out, Putin told us so right after his meeting with Obama. But (they) gave the green light to the bilateral relations, cooperation between the United States and Russia in fight against Islamic State."

Russian opposition, however, was rattled by the Kremlin's request to send troops abroad and the secretive way the vote was held.

"The fact that the Federation Council considered sending our troops abroad behind closed doors looks unconstitutional," opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Twitter. "Or is it just their own grandsons who are going off (to fight)?"

In Baghdad, Saad al-Hadithi, spokesman for the Iraqi prime minister, said they are in talks with Russia "about cooperation on the side of security in the hope that shared intelligence will further our abilities to defeat the terrorists within our borders."

- AP