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## **AS RUSSIAN MILITARY EXERCISES IN ARMENIA, IS SYRIA ON ITS MIND?**

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The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Russia-led military bloc, is carrying out a series of exercises around Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The nature of the exercises have raised speculation that Moscow is angling to get some of its allies to deploy alongside Russian troops for a peacekeeping mission in Syria.

Currently, about 2,500 soldiers from CSTO member countries -- Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan -- are in Armenia's Baghramyan training facility. Before that, they were in Russia, and next will move to Kazakhstan and then Tajikistan.

In the current phase of the exercise, the scenario involves an armed group penetrating the borders of a CSTO member state. But the next phase, in Kazakhstan, the scenario will entail sending a group of CSTO peacekeepers to a non-member country as part of a UN peacekeeping operations. This is the second year that the CSTO has drilled on such a scenario.

"Thus, one can assume that in reality the CSTO considers that it could be Syria, or Ukraine, and any other country where CSTO members have joint interests," wrote Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta. The notion that the CSTO members have "joint interests" in Ukraine or Syria is a bit optimistic; the non-Russian members have shown nearly no interest in deploying with Syria, and even less in getting involved in Russia's war in Ukraine.

One analyst narrowed it down a bit more: "According to the goals and tasks that the CSTO units will work out at the polygons in Kazakhstan, we can conclude that they would be more useful in solving conflicts somewhere in Central Asia or the Middle East," military analyst Lieutenant-General Yuri Netkachev told Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

Russia has long talked of sending peacekeepers to Syria under the aegis of the CSTO, but those discussions appear to have become serious over the last year or so. And the UN is reportedly interested.

In June, Russian officials said that they were in negotiations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for those countries to send peacekeepers to Syria. Both Central Asian countries pushed back against that a bit but Kyrgyzstan, in particular, seems interested in sending its soldiers to Syria to get some real-life deployment experience.

Kyrgyzstan Prime Minister Sapar Isakov said on October 2 that the issue wasn't being discussed in the country, and that any such decision would have to be approved by the parliament and only under a United Nations mandate. The month before, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev made a similar statement, saying that the country would only send troops to Syria under a UN mandate and if approved by parliament.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said fairly categorically last year that he would not send the country's military abroad, but one military analyst interviewed about these new exercises believes there may be some room for negotiation.

"In Moscow's opinion, Lukashenka owes Putin — he did not support him in Syria, did not send its pilots, did not behave as an ally. On the other hand, a peacekeeping mission is an opportunity to show off on the international stage de-facto not taking part in hostilities — and Lukashenka, as we have seen, usually jumps at every opportunity to do so, the analyst, Alyaksandr Alesin, told BelSat TV.

There seems to be some possibility that Armenia could send a small detachment to Syria, as well. In August, a Russian general said that Armenia could send a unit of sappers to clear mines. Armenia said that was in fact possible.

During the discussions, Armenia expressed readiness to consider possibilities of becoming involved with a humanitarian demining detachment — in case of the launch of such an initiative, the Syrian government's consent, and observance of all international legal procedures — in those parts of Syria where there are no ongoing hostilities, the Armenian Ministry of Defense said in a statement to RFE/RL.

At the moment, the Armenian Defense Ministry has no information regarding the course of the formation of the coalition, its composition and especially time frames for its deployment, the

statement continued.

A lot would have to happen for the CSTO to actually deploy to Syria, not least a UN authorization for some sort of mission there. But at least from the perspective of the CSTO member states, it's looking a lot more likely than it ever has that they could be convinced to go.

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Kaynak/Source: