
U.S. FROWNS ON ARMENIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN RUSSIA-BACKED SYRIA MISSION

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The United States has indicated it does not support Armenia's participation in a Russia-backed mission in war-ravaged Syria, where Yerevan has dispatched demining experts and other personnel.

Armenia announced this month it had sent a team of dozens of mine-clearing sappers, medical personnel, and security officers to Syria to carry out "humanitarian activities" such as demining and providing medical assistance in the northern city of Aleppo, which had a large ethnic Armenian population before the war. h

"We recognize the desire of other nations to respond to the humanitarian situation in Syria, and we share the concerns about protecting religious minorities in the Middle East," the U.S. Embassy said in a statement sent to RFE/RL on February 13. Most ethnic Armenians are Christians, while Syria is mainly Muslim.

"However, we do not support any engagement with Syrian military forces, whether that engagement is to provide assistance to civilians or is military in nature," the statement said.

"Nor do we support any cooperation between Armenia and Russia for this mission," it added, saying that Russia had "partnered with" President Bashar al-Assad's government "to slaughter civilians and trigger a humanitarian catastrophe" and "continues to protect the Assad regime and its atrocities on [the] global stage."

Russia has given Assad crucial military and diplomatic backing throughout the nearly eight-year war in Syria, which began with a government crackdown on protesters in March 2011. The conflict has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.

Russia is to provide logistical support to the Armenian mission, which Yerevan said would be carried out "exclusively outside the zone of combat operations."

On February 12, however, Armenian Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan said that "if it's necessary to participate in hostilities as well, the Republic of Armenia will do that within the letter of the law."

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian seemed to cast doubt on that, saying on February 13 that he was unaware of the defense minister's remark and that there were no plans for Armenian personnel to take part in any combat operations.

Yerevan has traditionally had close ties with Moscow, and Russia has a large military base in

Armenia. The South Caucasus country is a member of security and economic groupings that link some of the former Soviet republics and are dominated by Russia.

Kaynak/Source: