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Medvedev Offers to Mediate Gadhafi's Removal

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A Libyan rebel standing next to a pickup truck converted into an armored combat vehicle near Misrata on Friday. **Rodrigo Abd**

DEAUVILLE, France — Russia has abandoned one-time ally Moammar Gadhafi and offered to mediate a deal for the Libyan leader to leave the country he has ruled for more than 40 years.

Friday's striking proposal by a leading critic of the NATO bombing campaign reflects growing international frustration with the Libyan crisis and a desire by the Kremlin for influence in the rapidly changing Arab landscape.

With Gadhafi increasingly isolated and NATO jets intensifying their attacks, Russia may also be eyeing Libya's oil and gas and preparing for the prospect that the lucrative Libyan market will fall into full rebel control.

"He should leave," President Dmitry Medvedev said of Gadhafi at the Group of Eight summit in France. "I proposed our mediation services to my partners. Everyone thinks that would be

useful."

Analysts question whether Russia still has any leverage over Gadhafi, and the leaders of France, Britain and Germany said there was no point in negotiating directly with the Libyan leader himself.

"If Gadhafi makes this decision, which will be beneficial for the country and the people of Libya, then it will be possible to discuss the form of his departure, what country may accept him and on what terms, and what he may keep and what he must lose," Medvedev told reporters.

Medvedev said he was sending envoy Mikhail Margelov to the rebel stronghold of Benghazi immediately to start negotiating, and that talks with the Libyan government could take place later. Margelov said earlier Friday that it was necessary to negotiate with all "reasonable" representatives of the government, including Gadhafi's sons.

In response, Libya's deputy foreign minister, Khaled Kaim, said: "Russia is one of the traditional friends of Libya. ... We don't think that Russia will sway its position to side with NATO."

It was unclear what exactly Gadhafi — known as the Leader of the Revolution or Brother Leader in Libya — could step down from. He has no constitutional executive position but wields power by force of his personality and presence, making it difficult to guarantee that he has given up power as long as he and his sons remain in the country.

The opposition wants Gadhafi exiled. Medvedev said he would not offer Gadhafi refuge in Russia. But he said with a grin "such countries could be found" that would be willing to take him in.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the Foreign Ministry have accused NATO of using excessive force. The ministry recently held talks with representatives of both Gadhafi's government and the rebels.

Russia often straddles the divide between the Western nations with which it shares a table in the G8 and the Arab nations that Moscow nurtured during the Soviet era.

Moscow offered to negotiate with Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the 1990s and is a member of the so-called Quartet negotiating for Middle East peace, alongside the United States, European Union and United Nations.

Over the past decade, the Kremlin sought to revive its influence in the Middle East and saw Gadhafi as one of its partners in the region. Libya struck multibillion-dollar deals to procure Russian-made weapons, and Gazprom has big investments in Libya that have been threatened by Gadhafi's attacks on rebel forces.

Medvedev discussed the mediation offer with President Barack Obama at talks on the sidelines of the G8.

"The Russians, of course, have long-standing relationships in Libya that frankly we don't have," U.S. deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes said Friday. "We are going to be

in close touch with the Russians as they pursue their conversations with the Libyans."

A Libyan rebel spokesman, Abdel-Hafidh Ghoga, said Russia's offer should have come sooner. "It's too late, and it's not a big deal," Ghoga, the vice chairman of the opposition National Transitional Council, told a rally in the eastern city of Benghazi.

But the timing may be propitious.

Libya's rebels have consolidated their position, and NATO pounded Tripoli with its heaviest strikes yet last week. Fuel and food shortages in the capital are starting to take a toll.

"The world does not see [Gadhafi] as the Libyan leader, and this is the position of not only the G8 but also of all the African states that attended today's summit," Medvedev said.

A Moscow-based Middle East expert expressed doubt that Gadhafi would agree to step down after Benghazi-based opposition leaders rejected a cease-fire agreement proposed by the African Union in late March.

Gadhafi "will fight to the end with unpredictable consequences for everyone involved," said Yevgeny Satanovsky, head of the Middle East Institute.

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