

Diplomat Warns of Syrian 'Chaos'

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Police standing at the gate of Damascus' central prison, adorned with photos of Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov warned that any efforts to overthrow Syrian President Bashar Assad by military force would unleash chaos in the Middle East, saying Russia categorically opposes outside "interference."

The European Union tightened sanctions against Syria last week, banning imports of crude oil from the country after Russia blocked efforts by the European Union and United States to impose punitive measures through the United Nations.

"Russia is categorically against any interference, especially military, in the internal affairs of a country," Bogdanov said Tuesday in response to e-mailed questions. "Efforts to resolve the problems in Syria through outside force would provoke utter chaos in the Middle East."

The government dispatched Bogdanov to Damascus last week to urge Assad to implement promised political changes and halt violence against protesters. Russia, which maintains its only military facility in the Middle East in Syria, a Soviet-era ally, has rejected U.S. and European calls for Assad to step down after a crackdown on unrest since March.

Russia will host Syrian opposition representatives for the second time in Moscow on Friday, Mikhail Margelov, presidential envoy to Africa and the Middle East, said Wednesday.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will also meet with Assad's media adviser, Bouthaina Shaaban, in Moscow next week, the ministry said. Shaaban is one of three Syrian officials the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on last month.

"The most important thing for us is to halt the bloodshed in Syria, and for that to happen, you need to talk to all sides," Margelov said in an interview in Yaroslavl.

Russia has said it will not halt weapons deliveries to Syria.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, meanwhile, urged Russia on Wednesday to shift its stance on Syria and support UN Security Council sanctions.

✘ "As for Syria, our assessments unfortunately do not coincide," Juppe said after annual security talks with Lavrov and the two nations' defense chiefs.

✘ "The disproportionate response of the Syrian leadership" to the demonstrations had caused "irreparable bloodshed," Juppe told a joint news conference with the other ministers, speaking through an interpreter.

Any efforts by the United States and Europe to force regime change in Syria risk triggering the country's collapse and further instability in the Middle East after they intervened to oust Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the State Duma's foreign affairs committee, said late last month.

Israel supports Russian efforts to encourage dialogue between Assad and the opposition, the country's ambassador in Moscow said.

"Cooperation between Russia and many countries in the Middle East dates back for decades," Dorit Golender said Monday. "The weight and influence of Russia, which is appealing to the conflicting sides in Syria to find a peaceful solution, may help them resolve the problems."

(Bloomberg, Reuters)

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