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Syrian President Thanks Russia for Support

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Syrian President Bashar Assad has thanked Russia for shielding his nation from international sanctions over a crackdown on protests.

Assad, speaking on Channel One state television in an interview broadcast Sunday, hailed the Russian veto of a European-backed UN Security Council resolution on Syria. He added that Syria would count on continued support from Moscow.

"We are relying on Russia as a country with which we have strong historic ties," Assad said.

The measure vetoed by Russia and China earlier this month would have been the first legally binding resolution against Syria since Assad's forces began attacking civilian protesters in mid-March. The UN estimates the crackdown has killed at least 3,000 people.

The U.S. and European countries have strongly criticized the veto. Russia defended its stance by saying the Western-backed resolution would have opened the door to possible military action.

President Dmitry Medvedev and other Russian leaders have strongly warned the West against emulating Libya's experience in Syria. Medvedev said Russia backs international demands that the Syrian government end violence against civilians, but also believes that the opposition must disavow "extremists."

"Since the first days of the crisis we have been in constant contact with the Russian government," Assad said in the interview. "We were telling our Russian friends in detail about how the situation was developing. Russia was aware of the danger of military or political intervention into Syria's domestic affairs, so it played an important role on the international stage, including the use of a veto at the UN Security Council."

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