

Moscow Not Helping Syrian Opposition

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A delegation of the Syrian National Council, led by chairman Burhan Ghalioun, front, seen in Moscow on Tuesday. **Denis Sinyakov**

Syrian opposition leaders pressed Moscow to join international calls for the resignation of President Bashar Assad on Tuesday, but the Foreign Ministry said Assad's opponents should hold talks with the government to end months of bloodshed.

After meeting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the head of the main Syrian National Council opposition group said dialogue would not work without sufficient pressure on Assad.

"Progress on the road to peaceful negotiations ... should start with a decisive step, a strong symbolic step — it should start with the international community and Arab countries and Russia also asking President Assad to resign in order for Syria to enter a new era," Burhan Ghalioun told reporters.

Russia joined China last month in a double veto of a UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned Syria's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters and potentially opened the door for sanctions. It has accused the West of discouraging dialogue between Assad and opponents.

In talks with his opponents, the Foreign Ministry offered no indication that Russia would grant their wish, suggesting it holds out the hope of securing a peaceful resolution without bowing to the West and abandoning its support for Syria's isolated leader.

Instead, the ministry said it had called "extremely clearly" on Ghalioun's delegation "to immediately join in the realization of the Arab League initiative to resolve the crisis in Syria through the launch of dialogue between Syria's authorities and the opposition."

Ghalioun said that in response to their requests for Moscow to call for Assad's resignation, Russian diplomats said that was not an Arab League condition for dialogue.

Syrian authorities agreed to the Arab League initiative on Nov. 2, pledging to pull the military out of restive cities, free political prisoners and start talks with the opposition, which wants to remove Assad and introduce democratic freedoms.

But the crackdown continued, and the Arab League decided on Saturday to suspend Syria's membership, a move Lavrov called a mistake.

"We, the Syrian National Council, think that Bashar al-Assad is the only obstacle on the path to achieving a free, democratic Syria," Ghalioun said.

Jordan's King Abdullah said Monday that Assad should step down.

Russia, which has close ties to Assad's government and has sold arms to Syria, has urged the longtime leader to implement promised reforms faster but echoed the government's assertion that its opponents share blame for the violence.

The United Nations says more than 3,500 people have been killed in eight months of protests in the Middle East nation, while Syria's government says armed "terrorist" gangs have killed 1,100 soldiers and police.

Russia, struggling to maintain what influence it has in the Arab world amid unrest that has toppled longstanding leaders, has taken a firm stand in opposition to the West on Syria after voicing anger over NATO air strikes that helped Libyan rebels oust Moammar Gadhafi.

Moscow let the NATO operation go ahead by abstaining in the UN Security Council vote that authorized it, but then accused the alliance of overstepping its mandate to protect civilians.

As Western pressure for Security Council action against Syria mounted, Russia emphasized that it would not support a resolution that only condemned Assad's government. It then vetoed the U.S.-backed European draft submitted last month, saying it would have opened the way for military intervention.

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