

Russia Likes Yemen Plan For Syria

June 07, 2012



President Vladimir Putin signing documents at a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Beijing on Thursday.

Russia would accept a Yemen-style power transition in Syria if it were decided by the people, a senior Russian diplomat said Thursday.

It was the latest in a series of statements seemingly aimed at distancing the Kremlin from President Bashar Assad.

The diplomat tried to deflect pressure on Moscow to help engineer Assad's exit from power, however, saying his fate is "not a question for us" but is up to Syrians themselves.

"Application of the so-called Yemen scenario to resolve the conflict in Syria is possible only if the Syrians themselves agree to it," Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said, Interfax reported. "The Yemen scenario was discussed by the Yemenis themselves. If this scenario is discussed by Syrians themselves and is adopted by them, we are not against it."

The statement essentially repeats the position Moscow has maintained throughout.

Street protests against Assad that began 15 months ago have evolved into armed insurgency as he stepped up efforts to crush dissent by military might.

Two reported massacres of civilians by pro-Assad forces since May 25 have heightened Western calls for Assad to make way for a democratic transition.

The idea of using the Yemen template in Syria is the latest attempt to break a stalemate in the UN Security Council.

After a year of mass protests against his autocratic rule and increasing armed anarchy, longtime Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh ceded power in February to a transitional administration led by his vice president.

In a sign of increasing pressure on Moscow, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sent a senior State Department official who works on Syria, Fred Hof, to Moscow on Thursday.

The Russian Foreign Ministry and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow declined immediate comment on the visit.

Clinton told Western and Arab nations at a meeting in Istanbul on Wednesday that a transition strategy in Syria must include Assad's full transfer of power, a senior State Department official said.

In a statement during a visit to Beijing by Russian President Vladimir Putin, a regional security alliance led by Russia and China said it opposes military interference, forced power handovers and unilateral sanctions in dealings with Middle East states.

But Moscow has criticized Assad at times and courted his opponents, suggesting it is hedging its bets.

Analysts say Putin could be lured by or seek an orchestrated exit by Assad that could be presented as the work of the people, particularly if he doubts Assad can hang on to power for long and sees a chance of maintaining Russia's influence.

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