

Lavrov Denies Plotting Syria's Future With U.S.

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Syrian President Bashar Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands during a signing ceremony in the Kremlin in a 2005 AP file photo. **Sergei Chirikov**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday that Moscow isn't discussing Syria's future without President Bashar Assad as Washington has claimed, in the latest volley in a contentious back-and-forth on how to end the bloody conflict.

Lavrov denied Thursday's statement by U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland that Moscow and Washington "are continuing to talk about a post-Assad transition strategy."

Lavrov, who met with the State Department's No. 2 official, William Burns, in Kabul on Thursday, maintained that Russia believes it's up to the Syrians to determine their country's future and said foreign players shouldn't meddle.

"It's not true that we are discussing Syria's fate after Bashar Assad," Lavrov said following talks in Moscow with his Iraqi counterpart. "We aren't dealing with a regime change either through approving unilateral actions at the United Nations Security Council or through taking

part in some political conspiracies."

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has issued increasingly harsh words over Russia's refusal to take tougher measures on Syria, though her accusation that Russia "dramatically" escalated the crisis in Syria lost steam Thursday when the State Department acknowledged that helicopters she accused Moscow of sending were actually refurbished ones already owned by the Assad regime.

The claim had complicated larger goals of U.S. President Barack Obama's administration for Syria and U.S.-Russian relations.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday that Moscow is only providing Syria with defensive weapons, adding that the refurbishment of the helicopters supplied many years ago had been planned in advance.

Lavrov argued that an international conference on Syria that Russia has proposed should focus on persuading the Syrian parties to sit down for talks. He said that a June 30 meeting on Syria in Geneva proposed by UN and Arab League envoy for Syria, Kofi Annan, should pursue the same goal, warning that Russia would oppose any attempt to use the conference to determine Syria's future.

"This meeting should be aimed at mobilizing resources that foreign players have to create conditions needed to start an all-Syrian political process, not to predetermine its direction," Lavrov said.

He warned against using the conference to "justify any future unilateral actions."

In an apparent reference to U.S. objections against Iran's participation, Lavrov said the conference organizers should be driven by a desire to settle the conflict, not "ideological preferences."

In an opinion piece posted Friday on the Huffington Post, Lavrov insisted that "Russia is not a defender of the current regime in Damascus and has no political, economic or other reasons for becoming one."

He also reaffirmed criticism of Assad, saying "the main responsibility for the crisis that has swept over the country lies with the Syrian government."

But Lavrov also argued that any push for an immediate ouster of Assad would plunge Syria into an all-out war.

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