

Russia Urges Syria Opposition to Drop Demand for Assad to Quit

By [The Moscow Times](#)

November 06, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday urged the Syrian opposition to abandon its precondition that President Bashar Assad step down before any talks can be held on ending the conflict.

Speaking after meeting former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab, who defected to Jordan last August, Lavrov accused the opposition of disregarding Syrian lives by demanding the immediate removal of Assad.

"The most important thing is stopping the violence immediately. If it is more important to the other side to change the Assad regime, then they want to continue the bloodbath in Syria," Lavrov said in remarks translated from Russian.

Lavrov was rebuffed by Hijab, who said Assad's removal was "the only way out" for there to be a negotiated settlement to the 19-month-old conflict.

"Russia is searching for a political solution in which Bashar Assad stays," he told Arabic language Al-Arabiya television.

Lavrov, whose country is one of Assad's strongest allies, said both the government and the opposition must stick to proposals reached last June in Geneva by world powers. These called for a transitional government in Syria but did not say that Assad must surrender power.

Russia opposed Western and Arab insistence that Assad must quit.

Hijab, the most senior defector to leave Syria since the beginning of the uprising, is playing an increasing role in efforts to come up with a new political structure for the fragmented opposition.

"We told Lavrov frankly that there could be no political solution at all with the presence of Bashar Assad. It would be impossible," he said.

"First Assad and all figures of his regime whose hands have been drenched in blood have to go and then the solution begins," he added.

Russia and China, both permanent Security Council members, have vetoed three Western-backed UN draft resolutions condemning Assad's government for its crackdown on the uprising that began with peaceful demonstrations in March 2011 before turning into an armed revolt. About 32,000 people have been killed.

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