

Assad Asylum Supported

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — Russia would welcome any country's offer of safe haven for Syrian President Bashar Assad, but has no plans to make one of its own, Moscow's foreign minister said in the latest comments to suggest a growing distance between the two allies.

Sergei Lavrov's remarks on Friday night were among the clearest signs yet that Russia could be preparing for a Syria without Assad, as rebel pressure on the embattled leader intensifies. Over the past four weeks, fighting has reached Damascus, his seat of power, and rebels have captured a string of military bases.

Speaking to reporters late Friday, Lavrov reiterated Moscow's position that "it doesn't invite President Assad here," although he said other countries had asked Russia to convey their offer of safe passage to Assad. While he would not name the countries, Lavrov said Russia had responded by telling them to go directly to the Syrian leader.

"If there is anyone willing to provide him guarantees, they are welcome!" Lavrov said on board a plane returning from Brussels, where he attended a Russia-EU summit. "We would be the first to cross ourselves and say: 'Thank God, the carnage is over! If it indeed ends the carnage, which is far from certain.'"

(AP)

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