

Foreign Ministry Rejects Assad Exit as Precondition for Syria Deal

By [The Moscow Times](#)

January 12, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Russia voiced support on Saturday for international peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi but insisted Syrian President Bashar Assad's exit cannot be a precondition for a deal to end the country's conflict.

A Foreign Ministry statement following talks in Geneva on Friday with the United States and Brahimi reiterated calls for an end to violence in Syria, but there was no sign of a breakthrough.

"As before, we firmly uphold the thesis that questions about Syria's future must be decided by the Syrians themselves, without interference from outside or the imposition of prepared recipes for development," the statement said.

Brahimi said the issue of Assad, who the United States, European powers and Gulf-led Arab states insist must step down to end the 21-month-old civil war, appeared to be a sticking

point.

Russia has been Assad's most powerful international backer, joining with China to block three Western- and Arab-backed UN Security Council resolutions aimed to pressure him or push him from power. Assad can also rely on regional powerhouse Iran.

Russia called for "a political transition process" based on an agreement by foreign powers last June.

Brahimi, who is trying to build on that agreement, has met three times with senior Russian and U.S. diplomats since early December and met Assad in Damascus.

Russia and the United States disagreed over what the June agreement meant for Assad, with Washington saying it sent a clear signal he must go and Russia contending it did not.

Qatar on Saturday made a fresh call for an Arab force to end bloodshed in Syria if Brahimi's efforts fail, according to Doha-based al Jazeera television.

"It is not a question of intervention in Syria in favor of one party against the other, but rather a force to preserve security," Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, said in an al Jazeera broadcast.

Although Russia sells arms to Syria and rents one of its naval bases, the economic benefit of its support for Assad is minimal. Analysts say President Vladimir Putin wants to prevent the United States from using military force or support from the UN Security Council to bring down governments it opposes.

However, as rebels gain ground in the war, Russia has given indications it is preparing for Assad's possible exit, while continuing to insist he must not be forced out by foreign powers.

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