

Leaving Syria, Russians Cross Into Lebanon

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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MASNAА, Lebanon — Four buses carrying Russian citizens escaping the Syrian civil war crossed into Lebanon on Tuesday, marking the first time Moscow has helped Russians leave the country since the start of the conflict nearly two years ago.

Four buses carrying about 80 people, mostly women and children, crossed into Lebanon in the early afternoon at the Masnaa border crossing, where an official from the Russian Embassy in Beirut was waiting for them.

The development came after Russian officials announced in Moscow on Monday that about 100 of their citizens in Syria would be taken out overland to Lebanon and flown home from there.

The land route was presumably chosen because of renewed fighting near the Damascus airport. The officials also said that thousands more could follow — many of them Russian

women married to Syrians — and that later evacuations could be by both air and sea.

Russia has been Syrian President Bashar Assad's main ally since the uprising against him began in March 2011, using its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to shield Damascus from international sanctions over the Syrian regime's brutal crackdown on dissent.

Last month, Russia started distancing itself from Assad, with President Vladimir Putin saying that he understood Syria needed change and that he was not protecting the Syrian ruler.

Some of the Russians inside the buses crossing into Lebanon on Tuesday closed the curtains so they would not be seen by journalists waiting at the border. Most of the adults refused to comment and those who did speak said only that they were going home to visit relatives.

The group was expected to travel to the Lebanese capital and board two planes that Russia sent to Beirut to take them home.

Officials at the Russian Embassy in Damascus said they had several thousand citizens registered as living in Syria. The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media, said some of the people who were being evacuated Tuesday had lost their houses and needed Russian government assistance to leave.

The officials downplayed the evacuation effort, denying that they were assisting their nationals' departures from Syria because of the deteriorating security situation.

One of the officials, who identified herself only as the embassy's head of protocol, said the government was simply responding to those who had asked for help in leaving Syria, suggesting they were mostly Russians living in areas where the fighting is fiercest.

"It's their personal desire to leave Syria," the official said. She noted that thousands of Russians were still in Syria.

In Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov dismissed reports that Tuesday's evacuations were the beginning of a Russian exodus from Syria. He told media there Russian planes landed in Beirut to deliver humanitarian aid at the Syrian government's request and would take home those who wanted to leave.

"There is no plan to take everyone out," Denisov said. "Since the planes have arrived there, and some people with children want to leave, we are ready to take them out."

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