

Lavrov Says West Strengthening Islamic Militants in Syria

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BEIRUT — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday criticized an upcoming meeting of the Friends of Syria group in Istanbul — which brings together Western and Arab supporters of the Syrian opposition — and said efforts to isolate Syrian President Bashar Assad and to arm the opposition were strengthening Islamic militants.

Islamic extremists, such as the al-Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra group, are among the most effective fighters on the rebel side in the civil war, and have spearheaded most of the opposition victories in recent months.

"The consequences of the Syrian crisis are horrible: casualties, suffering, humanitarian crises," Lavrov said. "If the priority is peace, changes and democratic reforms, it's necessary to force the warring parties to sit down for talks. If Assad's departure is the priority, the cost of such [a] geopolitical approach will be more casualties."

"If we allow those making the emphasis on [a] military solution to control the situation, those horrors ... will multiply and the terrorists' influence in the region will grow," he added. "The longer the emphasis on the regime isolation and military solution is made, the more these threats will grow."

In central Syria on Wednesday, a government rocket attack killed at least 12 people in a village, while rebels battled regime forces over two key military bases in the northwest where government troops broke an opposition siege last week, activists said.

The fighting in both places ties into efforts by President Bashar Assad's military to reverse rebel advances that have left vast stretches of northern Syria in the hands of opposition fighters. The government is also eager to shore up supply lines to its forces stretched thin by the 2-year-old fight against a relentless rebellion in a conflict that has killed more than 70,000.

The regime has counted on its two closest allies, Iran and Russia, for support on the international stage and for weapons and cash. The opposition, meanwhile, has received backing from Sunni Arab states as well as Turkey, the U.S. and its Western allies.

Officially, the West is only providing nonlethal assistance. But officials say that in recent months the U.S. and other countries have stepped up covert support for rebels on the ground by helping to coordinate shipments of new weapons and training rebels in Jordan.

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