

Putin Locks Horns With West Over Syria at G8 Summit

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Putin, second from left, talking Tuesday with British Prime Minister David Cameron, Obama and other leaders. **Ben Stansall**

ENNISKILLEN, Northern Ireland — President Vladimir Putin clashed with other world leaders over the civil war in Syria at a tense Group of 8 summit, blocking any mention of the fate of Syrian leader Bashar Assad from a final communique issued Tuesday.

Isolated at the G8, Putin resisted attempts by other world leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, to get him to agree to anything that would imply Assad should step down or that Russia should tone down its support for Assad.

Striking a defiant tone after two days of talks, Putin also said he could not rule out new arms contracts with Assad's government.

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Western powers tried to hash out a statement with teeth on Syria that all G8 leaders could agree on, though sources indicated that Putin resisted.

"We remain committed to achieving a political solution to the crisis based on a vision for a united, inclusive and democratic Syria," the final communique said.

"We strongly endorse the decision to hold as soon as possible the Geneva conference on Syria," the communique said.

G8 leaders also called on the Syrian authorities and the opposition to commit to destroying all organizations affiliated with al-Qaida.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, speaking on the sidelines of the summit, said Russia had refused to accept any mention of Assad's fate in the communique.

"This would be not just unacceptable for the Russian side, but we are convinced that it would be utterly wrong, harmful and would completely upset the political balance," Ryabkov said.

But Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said the communique represented a real shift by Putin.

"We have a very different outcome and much better outcome than I thought we were going to have," Harper told reporters. Before the summit, Harper had said he feared Putin's support for Syria would make a G8 agreement difficult.

"I think this was a very significant move on the part of Mr. Putin and the Russians," he said.

Russia has been Assad's most powerful supporter as the Syrian leader's forces struggle to crush an uprising in which 93,000 people have been killed since March 2011. Assad can also count on backing from Iran.

The United States, Turkey, and European and Gulf Arab states support the rebels, who have lost ground to Assad's troops in recent weeks.

Russia and the United States agree that the warring sides should be brought together to discuss Syria's future at a peace conference as soon as July. But its timing was under question, and one source said it would be delayed until August.

"Our positions do not fully coincide, but we are united by the common intention to end the violence, to stop the number of victims increasing in Syria, to resolve the problems by peaceful means, including the Geneva talks," Putin said after meeting with Obama on Monday.

"We agreed to push the process of peace talks and encourage the parties to sit down at the negotiation table, organize the talks in Geneva," Putin said.

Obama and his allies want Assad to cede power, while Putin, whose rhetoric has become increasingly anti-Western since his re-election last year, believes that would be disastrous at a time when there is no clear transition plan.

Putin's isolation at the G8 may damage perceptions of Russia, but for Putin himself it would be a chance to portray himself as a strongman who can stand up to a bullying West — an image certain to please the domestic audience.

He appeared tense on the first day and has faced a barrage of criticism over his Syria stance. Canada's Stephen Harper accused him of supporting "thugs" in Damascus. His meeting with Obama was frosty, and both men looked uncomfortable.

But Putin said Tuesday that he did not feel isolated at the summit despite clashing with other leaders. He added that some of his counterparts had also expressed doubt that forces loyal to Assad had used chemical weapons.

Obama could offer Putin several incentives to change his mind, but it was unclear what exactly was on the table as talks continued behind closed doors at the G8 venue.

One area of compromise could be for the West to ease back on its proposals to arm the Syrian rebels or push for no-fly zones, which Russia opposes.

Syria is one of Russia's last bastions of support in the Middle East, and the Russian navy has a vital base at the Mediterranean port of Tartus.

However, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday that the Syrian opposition must not set preconditions for attending the proposed peace conference, suggesting sticking points remained.

Renewed diplomatic tension over Syria stems from last week's decision by the United States to step up military aid to the rebels, including automatic weapons, light mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

Ryabkov said Russia's leaders urged the West to think "three or four times" before going ahead with plans to arm the rebels fighting to topple the Syrian leader.

Moscow could not accept that Assad had used chemical weapons against the rebels, an allegation that had tipped Washington's hand in deciding to arm the anti-Assad fighters, Ryabkov added.

As peace efforts have faltered and arms have flowed into rebel hands, heavy fighting on the northern front lines in and around the Syrian city of Aleppo has resumed as government forces seek to build on battlefield gains further south.

Those backing the rebels — including Britain, France, Turkey and Arab countries as well as the U.S. — were driven to intensify support in recent weeks to rescue the rebellion after Assad's forces scored important military gains.

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