

Putin Warns Against Arming Syrian Rebels

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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ST. PETERSBURG — President Vladimir Putin has cautioned the West against arming Syrian rebel forces, which he said included "terrorist" groups, and warned that a swift exit by President Bashar Assad risked creating a dangerous power vacuum.

"If the United States ... recognizes one of the key Syrian opposition organizations, al-Nusra, as terrorist ... how can one deliver arms to those opposition members?" Putin told a panel with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday. "Where will they end up? What role will they play?"

Putin defended his own country's arm sales to the embattled Syrian government as "entirely legal, repeating Russia's position that outsiders should not determine the fate of Assad and Syria.

"If Assad goes today, a political vacuum emerges — who will fill it?" Putin said at a later news

conference with Merkel. "Maybe those terrorist organizations. Nobody wants this, but how can it be avoided? After all, they are armed and aggressive."

The only solution, he said, was an international peace conference that Russia and the U.S. are seeking to convene.

At the United Nations, a UN spokeswoman said senior U.S. and Russian officials would meet with the international mediator on Syria in Geneva on Tuesday to discuss the peace conference.

The peace conference, however, is not expected to occur before August after Group of Eight leaders clashed with Russia over the nature of a transitional government.

Separately, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told The Associated Press on Friday that Washington was sending contradictory signals on Syria that could derail the conference.

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