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Russia Vows Support for Syria's Assad to Combat 'Terrorism'

By The Moscow Times

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Russia said Wednesday it would support President Bashar Assad to combat "terrorism" in the Middle East, indicating there was no new room for compromise on one of the key contentious issues in the Syrian conflict.

President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov held talks with Assad's foreign minister, Walid al-Moualem, on the Black Sea as part of Moscow's renewed diplomatic push to restart peace talks on Syria.

"We share the view that the main factor driving the situation in the Middle East is the terrorist threat," Lavrov told a joint news conference with Moualem. "Russia will continue supporting Syria ... in countering this threat."

Russia has been the key international ally of Assad in the conflict, which is in its fourth year and where the situation on the ground has deteriorated as Islamic State, an al-Qaida offshoot, has grabbed large swathes of land.

The last round of talks between Damascus and the opposition collapsed in February over rifts over Assad's role in any transition out of the conflict. The main Syrian opposition in exile and its Western and Arab backers want him to go.

But Moscow says advances made by Islamic hardliners mean fighting "terrorism" should be the top priority for all "healthy" forces now, and that that is not possible without cooperating with Assad.

Lavrov criticised the United States for refusing to do that.

Moualem told the news conference his meeting with Putin was "very productive" and that the Russian president confirmed his resolve to develop ties with Damascus and Assad.

Stalled Talks

Moualem also said he and Lavrov had discussed Moscow's proposal to host peace talks on Syria and that they agreed to continue discussing this. Lavrov said bringing together Damascus and the opposition was difficult and required more time.

It is not clear who would represent the opposition if any such talks are held.

While the West and Arab countries seeking Assad's exit support the Turkey-based National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Russia says the exiled organization is just one opposition group and has no real influence on what is happening on the ground.

Lavrov said any talks should include "a wide range of social and political forces."

The United States has led a military campaign against Islamic State that includes air strikes in Syria and Iraq and support for moderate opposition groups and rebel fighters.

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