

Russia Arming Iraq and Syria to Fight Islamic State, Lavrov Says

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Iraqi security forces demonstrate their skills during military training in Jurf al-Sakhar.

Russia is arming Iraq and Syria to help them fight Islamic State, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday, calling the radical militant group the main threat to his own country's security.

"Islamic State is our main enemy at the moment. If only because hundreds of Russian citizens, hundreds of Europeans, hundreds of Americans fight alongside IS," he said in an interview with three radio stations. "They are already coming back... and to enjoy themselves could stage vile acts at home."

Russia has criticized air strikes by a U.S.-led coalition against Islamic State positions in Syria and Iraq, and encouraged Washington to work with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the battle against IS.

"We are helping both Iraq and Syria, possibly more effectively than anyone else, by providing

weapons to their armies and security forces," Lavrov said, without giving details of the weapons.

Moscow faces an Islamist insurgency in the mainly Muslim North Caucasus region and President Vladimir Putin has warned that other countries could use radical Islam to try to weaken Russia.

Ties between Moscow and the West are at their lowest point in decades over the crisis in Ukraine, which was one of the main themes of the interview.

Lavrov said Nadezhda Savchenko, a Ukrainian pilot who is being held in a Russian jail, could not be freed as part of prisoner swaps or hostage releases outlined in a deal reached on Feb. 12 to end fighting in east Ukraine between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces.

But he said Savchenko, who faces charges of aiding the killing of two Russian journalists in east Ukraine, might be eligible for release under an amnesty envisaged by the agreement if she is convicted by a Russian court.

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