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UK Tells Russia and Iran: 'Call Damascus' to End Syria Conflict

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Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (L) sits next to Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad during a joint news conference in Damascus, Syria.

The conflict in Syria will not be resolved unless Russia and Iran use their influence on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to help reach a political solution, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said Wednesday.

Hammond also said Britain, which has repeatedly called for Assad to go, could be prepared to accept his staying in place for a transition period if it helped resolve the crisis.

Speaking to parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Hammond said any solution had to be political rather than military, but conceded that Britain was not able to make that happen by "talking nicely" to the different players in Syria.

"Essentially this is going to have to be a decision made by the sponsors of the key players in

Syria, and in particular Iran and Russia deciding to call the shots with the Assad regime — make it clear that there has to be change," he said.

"They can do that, they can make a phone call. Russia and Iran could have a discussion today, make a phone call to Damascus tomorrow and change the future of this situation."

Iran and Russia support Assad, who is opposed by most Western countries including Britain and the United States.

Russia confirmed Wednesday that it had military experts on the ground in Syria but said they were only there to help the Syrian authorities receive arms shipments which it has acknowledged sending in the past.

Officials in the United States, which is fighting an air war against the Islamist militant group Islamic State in Syria, have said in recent days that they suspect Russia is reinforcing Assad, Moscow's ally since the Cold War.

Hammond said Britain, which has repeatedly called for Assad to go, could be prepared to accept the Syrian leader staying in place for transition period if it helped resolve the crisis.

"We are not saying on day one Assad and all his cronies have to go," he said.

"If there was a process that was agreed, including with the Russians and the Iranians, which took a period of months and there was a transition out during that period of months we could certainly discuss that."

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