

Putin and Obama Discuss Syria, Ukraine in Phone Call

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U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the crises in Syria and Ukraine during a phone conversation, the White House and Kremlin said in separate statements Sunday — each recounting its own side of the conversation.

Regarding Ukraine — where Moscow-backed separatist insurgents are fighting Kiev government forces in the east — the Kremlin said “Putin expressed hopes that the Kiev authorities will take, finally, practical steps toward fulfilling their obligations as soon as possible” under the so-called Minsk peace settlement, and implement a law on “special status” autonomy for the rebel regions.

Nothing in the statement gave any indication that Obama has different views on ways of resolving the crisis.

The White House, meanwhile, said the U.S. president “urged combined Russian-separatist forces to fulfill their Minsk obligations, especially adhering to the cease-fire” and allowing

“full access” for observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to war-ravaged eastern Ukraine.

With the conflict in eastern Ukraine well into its second year, Russian officials blame the unraveling of peace efforts on Kiev's supposed unwillingness to deliver on its part of the deal. Western governments accuse Moscow of fueling the conflict by supporting the insurgents and refusing to use its influence to persuade rebels to meet their obligations under the Minsk deal.

On Syria, the Kremlin said “a special emphasis was placed on the need to establish close working contacts between representatives of the Russian and U.S. defense ministries to allow to carry out a consistent and successful fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups.”

The White House confirmed that the U.S. and Russian leaders agreed their governments “will remain in communication” on the efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis.

But “Obama emphasized the importance now of Russia playing a constructive role by ceasing its air campaign against moderate opposition forces in Syria,” the White House said.

Moscow maintains that its air strikes in Syria, which began on Sept. 30, 2015, are aimed against terrorist groups. But the U.S. and its European allies accuse Russia of using the air campaign to prop up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad by targeting his political opponents, including Western-backed rebel groups.

The Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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