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Russia Says No Reason for Assad to Give Up Syria Leadership

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Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin / Kremlin Press Service

(Bloomberg) — Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should be allowed to run for re-election, Russia's top envoy for Syria said, dismissing Western efforts to condition reconstruction aid on the departure of a leader blamed for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his citizens.

"I don't see why he shouldn't or wouldn't run for another presidential term," Alexander Lavrentiev, appointed by the Kremlin to steer the Syria peace process, told Bloomberg in an interview in Ankara. "This is entirely up to him."

President Vladimir Putin Monday declared victory in his two-year military intervention in Syria, ordering troops to begin withdrawal. The operation succeeded in shoring up Assad against rebels supported by the U.S. and regional powers and marks a dramatic triumph for the Kremlin in its efforts to squeeze out Washington as a major Middle East player.

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The U.S. and its European and Arab partners have for years insisted that Assad must go and are now using the carrot of funding for rebuilding the shattered nation in a final attempt to pressure the Syrian leader. The International Monetary Fund estimates the cost of reconstruction at $200 billion, and neither of Syria's main allies, Russia and Iran, can afford to pick up the bill.

'Simplistic Approach'

"It's a simplistic approach when some Western countries say that they'll give money only when they see that the opposition comes to power or their interests are fully accommodated," said Lavrentiev, who was in the Turkish capital accompanying Putin on a lightning three-nation Middle East tour Monday that included stops in Syria and Egypt.

"It's not all about the U.S., France or Great Britain. There are Russia, Iran, China, India and many other countries," he said, adding that Syrian business could also contribute to the reconstruction of the country.

Russia plans to hold a conference of the Syrian government and opposition groups in the Black Sea resort of Sochi early next year to agree on the framework for a political settlement including a new constitution that would then be endorsed at United Nations-chaired talks in Geneva.

Russia's initiative looks like a quick-fix arrangement to leave Assad in power and get someone else to foot the bill for reconstruction, according to White House officials. The U.S. and its European allies are in agreement there shouldn't be any international funding for rebuilding in the areas under Assad's control, they said.

Under a plan endorsed by the UN Security Council in 2015, Syria would hold presidential elections under international supervision within 12 months of the formation of an interim government.

The U.S., European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council all refused to recognize the previous election in 2014, when Assad won another seven years in power with 89 percent of the vote. The 6 1/2 year conflict has killed 400,000 people and forced millions of others to flee their homes.

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