

Russia Criticizes Arabs Over Position on Syria

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia opposes the Arab League's decision to suspend Syria and believes that Western nations are inciting opponents of President Bashar Assad to seek his removal, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted as saying Monday.

Russian news agencies said Lavrov had also reiterated Moscow's opposition to any new international sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program and said other countries were whipping up tension to justify imposing unilateral sanctions.

His remarks underscored the Kremlin's disagreements with the West and other nations on how to end months of violence in Syria and persuade Iran to address international concerns that it could be seeking nuclear weapons.

"We believe it is wrong to suspend Syria's membership of the Arab League," RIA-Novosti quoted Lavrov as saying during a flight back to Moscow from a Pacific Rim summit in Hawaii, where he accompanied President Dmitry Medvedev.

"Those who made this decision have lost a very important opportunity to shift the situation into a more transparent channel," Lavrov said.

The Arab League suspended Syria and called on its army to stop killing civilians on Saturday, a surprise move that some Western leaders said should prompt tougher international action against Assad.

Syria has called for an emergency Arab summit in an apparent attempt to prevent the suspension.

Russia, which has close ties to Assad's government and has sold arms to Syria, joined forces with China in October to veto a Western-backed UN Security Council resolution that would have condemned Syria's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

Moscow has called on Assad to implement promised reforms faster but has said his opponents share the blame for the violence and, singling out the United States and France, accused the West of discouraging dialogue in Syria.

"There has been and continues to be incitement of radical opponents [of Assad's government] to take a firm course for regime change and reject any invitations to dialogue," Interfax news agency quoted Lavrov as saying.

He said there were "undeniable instances" of covert arms supplies to government opponents, Interfax reported.

"Weapons are being delivered to Syria through contraband channels via Turkey, Iraq and other countries," he said.

After abstaining from a Security Council vote in March that led to a NATO air campaign that helped oust Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, Russia has hardened its opposition to Western pressure on Syria and Iran.

Lavrov suggested widespread attention to a UN nuclear agency report last week that deepened Western suspicions about Iran's intentions was aimed "to whip up passions in public opinion and lay the groundwork for new bilateral sanctions."

"We consider the sanctions track on Iran to have been exhausted," Interfax quoted him as saying.

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