

# Russia Calls UN Draft on Syria 'Path to Civil War'

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Syrian forces clashing with defectors on Monday as bloodshed spreads.

A senior Russian diplomat said Tuesday that the push to adopt a Western-Arab draft UN Security Council resolution on Syria would lead the country down a “path to civil war.”

Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov underscored Moscow’s opposition to the draft, which endorses an Arab League plan calling for President Bashar Assad to step down, but he stopped short of an explicit threat to block it with a veto.

“The Western draft Security Council resolution on Syria will not lead to a search for compromise,” Gatilov wrote on his Twitter feed. “Pushing it is a path to civil war.”

The Arab League initiative was to be presented to the Security Council on Tuesday, and Western members want a vote on the resolution, backing the league’s call for the “transfer of power from the president” of Syria, later this week.

A draft of the resolution calls for Assad to hand power to his deputy and insists there will be

no use of foreign forces in the country.

The draft text calls on Assad's regime to immediately put "an end to all human rights violations and attacks against those exercising their rights to freedom of expression."

It also calls on Assad to delegate his "full authority to his deputy" to allow a national unity government to lead the transition to a democratic system.

The text, drafted by Morocco, insists that it does not compel "states to resort to the use of force, or the threat of force."

Russia has said the Western-Arab draft is unacceptable in its current form.

Gatilov had warned Friday that a quick vote would be doomed to failure, a strong suggestion that Moscow could use its veto if the text is not changed significantly.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Australia on Tuesday that Russia would never let the Security Council approve military action in Syria, according to Russian news agencies.

"If the [Syrian] opposition refuses to sit at the negotiating table with the regime, what is the alternative — to bomb? We've been through that before," he said at a news conference, Itar-Tass reported.

"The Security Council will never approve that, I guarantee you," he said.

Syria has been Moscow's firmest foothold in the Middle East, paying cash for Russian weapons and hosting a naval maintenance facility on its Mediterranean coast that is Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

Syrian government forces reasserted control of Damascus suburbs on Tuesday after beating back rebels at the capital's doorstep.

Russia has said Assad's resignation must not be a precondition for a process meant to end the bloodshed in Syria and that any such specific political changes should be discussed as part of a peace process.

That suggests Moscow will demand removal of the call for Assad to step aside in talks on the draft.

Russia has also criticized the document's threat of "further measures" in case of noncompliance and the blame it puts on Syrian authorities for bloodshed.

The United Nations estimates that more than 5,000 people have been killed since a crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators began nearly a year ago in Syria.

Moscow says Assad's opponents must share the blame and accuses the West of encouraging them to press for his ouster instead of entering into negotiations.

Russia offered Monday to host talks between Syria's government and its opponents.

Opposition leaders swiftly rejected the idea, calling it a ploy to buy time and delay action by

the Security Council.

Russia has warned that it would not allow foreign intervention in Syria after accusing the United States and other NATO countries of violating the mandate of a March 2011 Security Council resolution on Libya and using it to oust Moammar Gadhafi.

Russia and China vetoed a European-drafted resolution on Syria in October. China is expected to follow Russia's lead again, but Western envoys say they have enough support in the 15-nation council to pass the resolution unless it is vetoed.

Russia may feel that abstaining from a vote on the draft resolution, which would enable it to pass, would be tantamount to tacitly supporting the ouster of Assad and paving the way to potential military intervention.

Analysts say Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — who has bitterly criticized the council resolution authorizing NATO's Libya campaign, which Russia let pass by abstaining — wants to look firm in Western eyes and avoid allowing a new precedent for regime change aided from outside.

✉(Reuters, AP)

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