

Russia Open to Syria Peacekeeper Plan

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia and China, the two countries that vetoed a UN Security Council resolution addressing ongoing violence in Syria, are now weighing an Arab League proposal to station peacekeepers there.

Russia is open to the alternative, but Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that Russia would not support the peacekeeping plan unless there was a halt to violence by both government forces and their armed opponents.

He suggested that the latter would be tough to achieve.

"The tragedy is that the armed groups that are confronting the forces of the regime are not subordinate to anyone and are not under control," Lavrov said. "A halt to the violence must be universal."

The Obama administration said Monday that it backs Arab League plans to end the violence in Syria but noted several obstacles to deploying a proposed peacekeeping force to the country and withheld full endorsement of the idea.

The administration has said it does not see a military solution to the crisis, yet U.S. officials indicated they would consider the Arab League call for peacekeepers and discuss it with various countries to see whether such an idea is feasible. However, they stressed that there would be difficulties in getting required UN Security Council authorization for a force.

"We support the Arab League's decisions ... to try to end the violence and move toward a transition," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said. "There are a lot of challenges to be discussed as to how to put into effect all of their recommendations. And certainly, the peacekeeping request is one that will take agreement and consensus."

For now, talk of a peacekeeping force is preliminary and largely theoretical.

A Feb. 24 meeting is scheduled in Tunisia of the Friends of Syria group that will plot efforts to compel Syrian President Bashar Assad to end the crackdown.

Turkey has floated several ideas, including creating protected corridors to assist civilian victims of the violence.

Elsewhere, the UN human rights chief blamed disagreement in the Security Council for encouraging the Syrian government to step up attacks on opposition strongholds.

Russia and China on Feb. 4 vetoed a draft resolution condemning the crackdown and endorsing an Arab League plan for the Syrian leader to step aside.

The Arab League proposal to boost support for the uprising and to send in foreign peacekeepers has also drawn a guarded international response, even as Syrian forces bombarded rebellious districts of Homs and attacked other cities.

Russia, Assad's close ally and main arms supplier, said it could not support a peacekeeping mission unless both sides ceased the violence first. Some felt the move might only fan the flames of war.

Beirut-based political commentator Rami Khouri said that although the Arab plan was fraught with difficulty, it was also "incredibly bold and incredibly daring."

"It is the beginning of a very complex process driven by the Arab League," he said.

It hinged on convincing Russia that it must eventually give up its support for Assad and bringing the opposition together.

(Reuters, AP)

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