
FROM RUSSIA, FOR BASHAR'S EYES ONLY

05.02.2012

Al Arabiya, , 06 February 2012 You know something is not right in Russia when the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, sounds increasingly like Andrei Gromyko, his hermetic predecessor under the onetime communist regime. This week, Russia declared that it would oppose a United Nations Security Council draft resolution calling for Syrian President Bashar Assad to step down. The draft, introduced by Morocco, reiterates the aims of an Arab League plan for Assad to hand over power to a vice president and allow the formation of a national unity government. This government would work to end the violence in Syria by pulling the army and security forces out of cities and releasing prisoners. The Russians may sense that they're backing a lame horse in Assad, and an indication of this was Lavrov's statement in Australia this week. He noted, "We are not friends or allies of President Assad. We never said that Assad remaining in power is a precondition for regulating the situation. We said something else - we said that the decision should be made by Syrians, by the Syrians themselves. A Lavrov's caveat notwithstanding, you would have thought that the Syrians, or a substantial number of them, who have braved bullets and cannonfire for 10 months had already made their choice. Then again, the foreign minister's remarks jar with what the Syrians and their allies in Beirut are saying. For them, Russia has indeed made Assad's political survival a precondition for a deal over Syria. This seemed apparent when Moscow offered earlier this week to host a dialogue between the Syrian opposition and regime. Where is the truth? Perhaps in the rather straightforward reality that no leader who massacres thousands of his own people, whose army is falling apart through proliferating desertions, who has been asked to step down by the Arab states, reflecting an unprecedented consensus - that no such leader can hope to regain his legitimacy and remain in power for any significant length of time. This is so evident as to not merit repetition, and it's astonishing that the Russians, whatever their national interests, have refused to adapt to the shifting mood on Assad inside Syria, in the Arab world and internationally. The argument that Russia hopes to protect its stake in a future Syria is unconvincing. By holding on to Bashar Assad so stubbornly, despite the killing, the Russians are ensuring that a post-Assad government will impose retribution. Nor does there appear to be bargaining yet between the Russian government and the Syrian opposition that would persuade Russia to drop Assad if it gained satisfaction. Then there is the Libyan argument. Russia will not make the same mistake in Syria that it did in Libya, where it agreed to U.N. action leading to regime change in Tripoli, though the resolution authorizing force was intended solely to protect civilians. Perhaps, but to believe that version one must assume the Russians are boy scouts. From the moment NATO warplanes were permitted to bomb Moammar Gadhafi's forces, the only plausible outcome of the campaign was some version of regime change. Yet Moscow did not wield its veto. This week Lavrov also remarked, "Russia's policy is not about asking someone to step down; regime change is not our profession. A What an odd thing to say. It's not as if Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis and Syrians sought Russian acquiescence before overthrowing their dictators. Russia may have obstruction power, but regime change during the past year in the Arab world has been the

consequence of internal discontent. For Russia to hinder the process is an example of the domineering tendencies it has denounced in the West. Yet another Russian argument against approving the Arab plan to remove Assad from office is that this might provoke a Syrian civil war. Are the Russians watching the same channel as the rest of us? Syria, precisely because of the homicidal policies of its leader, is heading inexorably toward civil war. The single way to derail such an outcome — and the opportunities are diminishing daily — is to make it apparent to Assad and his acolytes that there is Arab and international unanimity, Russia included, behind their departure. Only a Security Council resolution affirming this will shake the will of the Alawite security elite bolstering Assads rule, forcing it to consider alternative options. Lavrov knows very well that one of the last threads sustaining the Syrian regimes confidence is Russian assistance and Russian arms. That Moscow refuses to use that thread as leverage is not making it more relevant; it is guaranteeing that Russia will gradually become less relevant to a solution in Syria. A more nuanced perspective is that Russia is using the Syrian card to negotiate with the West on other vital regional issues, for instance Iran, where Moscow opposes new sanctions and military action. That may be true, but if so it may not lead very far. For the West, sanctions preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons are a way of averting a military solution. No one, least of all the United States, wants a war with the Iranians. If Russia aspires to defend its conditions in Iran, it seems strange to do so at the expense of its welfare in Syria. The philosophical argument may be the most persuasive. Russia inherently opposes bringing foreign leaders down, because it doesnt want that principle to be used against its own leaders — above all Vladimir Putin, who is facing opposition in his renewed bid for the presidency. But even there you have to wonder. If Assad is all but destined to fall, isnt Putin better off embracing the winning side, to better bolster his [] A bona fides at home? It could be that were missing something much more obvious. Russia has a devouring need to affirm itself in a world where its power is dwindling. Flexibility means marginalization, in Russian eyes. Maybe, but inflexibility is frequently a surer ticket to the margins, and thats a price the Gromyko generation is still paying.

Kaynak/Source: