

# Syria is Russia's latest stand against the West

Moscow reasserting its authority in major crises, analysts say

BY COLUM LYNCH

UNITED NATIONS — With the United States and its allies pressing President Bashar al-Assad to step down, the Arab League last week issued a detailed plan for a political transition in Syria. The plan was welcomed by the Obama administration, and Arab leaders quickly said they would refer it to the United Nations.

And a day later, Russia had its say: Not a chance.

"This is an effort from the Arab League, if I understand correctly, to sort of already put a precooked solution on the table," said Vitaly I. Churkin, Moscow's envoy to the United Nations. "I understand that the attitude of Damascus to that has been negative."

The response doomed any hope of a quick resolution at the United Nations to bring greater pressure to bear on the Syrian government, but it also fell into a familiar pattern by which Moscow has shown a growing willingness to challenge the United States and its European partners on a range of issues.

In recent weeks, Moscow has sought U.N. scrutiny of possible crimes by NATO during its air campaign in Libya, and even called for investigations into organ sales in Kosovo, a close ally of the West. Most notably, Moscow has obstructed any effort to increase pressure on Iran.

Asked in an interview whether Russia would ever support a U.N. resolution imposing economic sanctions on the Islamic republic, Churkin said: "No chance, no chance, no chance. . . . Ever."

Critics say Moscow's tough line at the United Nations reflects what one senior council diplomat described as "the Putinization of Russian foreign policy," on the eve

of what many expect will be the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency. Other analysts say Russia is trying to reassert its authority in the council following a period in which the United States and Europe prevailed in the handling of several major crises, engineering the downfall of former Ivory Coast leader Laurent Gbagbo and, more recently, of Moammar Gaddafi in Libya.

"The Russians looked diminished in the first half of 2011, and the strategy is to show, one, they are prepared to act as a spoiler, but, two, they can also lay out a more proactive agenda," said Richard Gowan, an expert on the United Nations at the New York University Center for International Cooperation.

The United States and its European partners have responded to Russian aims by mounting a campaign to isolate it at the United Nations, and portraying Moscow as an obstacle to the democratic changes sweeping through the

Middle East.

This past week, for example, the United States, Britain, Germany and France publicly rebuked Syria's arms suppliers, a veiled reference to Russia, for continuing to sell weapons to Damascus.

"It is glaringly obvious that transferring weapons into a volatile and violent situation is irresponsible and will only fuel the bloodshed," Britain's U.N. envoy, Mark Lyall Grant, told the Security Council.

Russia is coming under mounting pressure to break with Assad from the Arab League, which is sending a delegation to the Security Council on Tuesday to press its case for a political transition that would require that the Syrian leader step aside. Meanwhile, Morocco, acting on behalf of a group of Western and Arab governments, has introduced a draft resolution endorsing the Arab League initiative calling on states to follow the Arab organization's example by imposing sanctions on Syria. The Russians have responded coolly.

The high-level diplomatic gamesmanship is playing out as violence continues to spiral in Syria, forcing the United States to prepare for the possible closure of its embassy and the evacuation of its diplomatic personnel. U.N. officials estimate that more than 5,400 civilians have been killed, mostly at the hands of government security forces, since protesters took to the streets earlier last year.

Russia's stance underscores the strength and depth of its relationship with Assad's regime, which is not only a recipient of Russian arms but also host of a Russian naval base. The crisis in Syria also has provided Moscow with an opportunity

to show it is a more reliable ally than Western powers, particularly the United States, which is seen by many in the region as having abandoned one of its closest allies, former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

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Vitaly I. Churkin, Moscow's envoy to the United Nations

expediency," Churkin said. "We are stronger on our allegiances than others."

Tensions between the West and Russia have spilled over into a series of highly personal attacks at the United Nations. Last month, U.S. Ambassador Susan E. Rice derided Churkin's appeal for a new probe into possible NATO killings as a "cheap stunt" aimed at distracting attention from the killing in Syria.

Churkin fired back at the Stanford-educated envoy, saying, "Really this Stanford dictionary of expletives must be replaced by something more Victorian." Rice's media spokesman posted a tweet with a photoshopped picture of Churkin on the head of "the Grinch Who Stole Christmas."

Asked if he was trying to change the subject from Syria, Churkin acknowledged that the Security Council has been the scene of "games of distraction," but he said Russia's concerns about the Libya mission were legitimate, asserting that the killing of civilians during the NATO campaign was "a real issue."

Russia, along with Brazil, China, India and South Africa, believe "it would be extremely dangerous if" the West continues to be "carried away by this regime-change idea," he said.

In Syria, Russia has pursued a complicated diplomatic strategy to shore up the regime, joining China in vetoing the Western-backed resolution threatening sanctions against Damascus, and introducing its own resolution. That resolution, now stalled, sought to focus the Security Council's energy on backing a political settlement between the Syrian government and the opposition, and cutting off military supplies to the opposition.

Under the resolution, Assad's army could still be armed.

Asked if Russia's ongoing arms sales to Assad's government were perhaps undercutting his government's effort to pursue a political settlement, Churkin said: "We are not doing anything which is contrary to international law. Other than that, we don't have to give any explanation to anybody."

lynchc@washpost.com

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## Observer mission in Syria is stopped

Worsening violence causes Arab League to end work after a month

BY AYA BATRAWY AND BASSEM MROUE

BEIRUT — The Arab League halted its observer mission in Syria on Saturday because of escalating violence that has killed about 100 people in the past three days, and pro-government Syrian forces battled dissident soldiers in a belt of suburbs on the eastern edge of Damascus.

The rising bloodshed has added urgency to new attempts by Arab and Western countries to end the 10 months of violence that, according to the United Nations, has left at least 5,400 people dead as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad attempts to crush protests.

The United Nations is holding talks on a new resolution on Syria and next week will discuss an Arab plan for halting the crisis. But the initiatives face two major obstacles: Syria's rejection of the Arab plan, which it says infringes on its sovereignty; and Russia's willingness to use its U.N. Security Council veto to shield Syria from sanctions.

Saturday's assault on several suburbs and villages on the eastern outskirts of Damascus marked an attempt by the government to uproot protesters and dissident soldiers who have joined the opposition, activists said.

Troops in tanks and armored personnel carriers attacked the suburbs of Kfar Batna, Saqba, Jisren and Arbeen, the closest of which lie only a few miles from downtown Damascus, said the Local Coordination Committees



MUZZAFFAR SALMAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Syrian woman speaks with an Arab League observer this month. Pro-government forces continue to attack dissidents.

activist network and the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Dissident troops were fighting back, they said.

In a nearby suburb, Douma, gunmen ambushed a bus carrying army officers, the state-run news agency SANA reported, calling the attackers "terrorists." It said seven officers were killed.

"The fighting today is the most intense near the capital since the uprising began," said Rami Abdul-Rahman, who heads the observatory. "The Syrian regime is trying to finish the uprising militarily now that the case is being taken to the United Nations."

The LCC and the observatory also reported intense fighting between troops and defectors in the town of Rastan, near the restive central city of Homs.

The observatory said at least 36 people were killed across the country Saturday — 17 civilians, three defectors and 16 troops — while the LCC said 20 died, half of

them in Homs province. At least 74 people, including small children, died Thursday and Friday.

The month-old Arab League observer mission in Syria had come under widespread criticism for failing to halt the crackdown. Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia pulled out of the mission Tuesday, asking the U.N. Security Council to intervene.

Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby said in a statement Saturday that the organization decided to halt the observers' work until the league's council can meet to decide the mission's fate.

Syria's state-run news agency quoted an unnamed official as saying Damascus "regrets and is surprised" by the Arab League decision.

— Associated Press

Batrawy reported from Cairo. Albert Aji in Damascus contributed to this report.

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## Yemeni president in U.S. for medical care

Permission for Saleh's visit is intended to help ease power transfer

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The embattled president of Yemen arrived in the United States for medical treatment Saturday, according to a statement from the country's foreign press office.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh arrived at an unspecified location in the United States after a journey that took him from Oman through London.

His staff has said he is in the United States to be treated for burns suffered during an assassination attempt in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in June.

The one-line Yemeni statement said Saleh was in the United States for a "short-term private medical visit."

After months of unrest, Saleh agreed in November to end his 33-year rule of the Persian Gulf state. His trip comes as Yemen prepares for an election on Feb. 21 to select his successor.

It is unclear how long he intends to remain in the United States. In a speech before he left Yemen for Oman a week ago, Saleh promised to return home before the election, but the United States and its allies have pressured him to leave Yemen for good.

American officials have said they do not wish him to settle in the United States, however, because of concerns that it would be seen as harboring an autocratic leader accused by many of his countrymen of using violence to

remain in power.

Saleh's opponents have accused him of trying to interfere with Yemen's new unity government, although he officially agreed to relinquish authority two months ago. He had previously spent three months in Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. His return to Yemen prompted more protests.

Saleh's travel plans in the United States have not been disclosed for security reasons. It was not clear Saturday where he intended to stay while in the country or where he would be receiving medical care.

He had been traveling on a chartered Emirates plane with a private doctor, several armed guards and relatives, according to an official in the Yemeni president's office who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the details.