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Associated Press

Russia to critics: We're not protecting Syria

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Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov](#) said Saturday that his government is not "protecting any regimes," defending his country's stance to Arab leaders angry over Moscow's blocking of international pressure on [Syria's](#) president to step down.

Lavrov spoke in Cairo at a heated meeting of the [Arab League](#) as U.N. envoy [Kofi Annan](#) met with [Syrian President Bashar Assad](#) in Damascus to mediate an end to the country's yearlong conflict. Amid the diplomatic efforts, Syrian troops were pushing ahead with a new assault on the northern region of Idlib, one of the centers of the uprising against Assad's rule.

Thick black smoke billowed over the town of Idlib as fresh shelling by regime forces sent families fleeing for safety.

The gathering at the Arab League with Lavrov was tense. [Russia](#), a longtime ally of Assad, has come under intense international criticism for vetoing a draft U.N. resolution last month that would have pressured Assad to step down — casting its vote even as the regime's troops blasted the city of Homs in one of the bloodiest offensives yet in the year-long crackdown on the uprising.

That brought accusations that Russia — and China, which also cast a veto — were giving Assad diplomatic cover to intensify a crackdown that has already killed more than 7,500 people by U.N. estimates. Activists put the number at more than 8,000. Arab countries were particularly angered by the veto because it stymied an Arab League peace plan for Syria.

"We are not protecting any regimes," Lavrov insisted at the League session. "We are protecting international law ... We are not looking for a special prize or geopolitical interest here."

He said Russia was trying to "promote a peaceful resolution" to Syria's crisis and that the immediate mission now is to halt violence and enable humanitarian assistance to reach those in need in Syria.

"If we agree to this, then we shall not really engage in discussing who is to blame" for the bloodshed, he said. "This could be done later by authority or international structure empowered to do this."

Speaking after him, Qatar's prime minister sharply criticized Lavrov's remarks. "There is systematic genocide by the Syrian government," Sheik Hamad bin Jassem Al Thani said, adding that Arabs are not looking for a ceasefire anymore after "genocide" and "systematic killings" of Syrians.