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Russia says will defend Syria against UN sanctions

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MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia, Syria's close ally since Cold War times, will do all it takes to block any attempt to slap economic sanctions against Damascus, a Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted as saying on Wednesday.

The United States and France threatened Syria with economic sanctions earlier this week if Damascus did not cooperate fully with a U.N. probe into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

"Russia will do everything necessary to stop attempts to introduce sanctions against Syria," spokesman Mikhail Kalmynin told Interfax news agency and other Russian media on the sidelines of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's trip to Israel.

Russia, a veto-wielding permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, angered the United States earlier this year by announcing plans to sell advanced missile systems to Syria, which Washington has accused of having links to terrorism.

A tough draft resolution, also backed by Britain and circulated to the 15 U.N. Security Council members, demands Damascus detain possible suspects in the assassination probe and make them available to U.N. investigators, who have complained about Syria's cooperation.

If Syria does not do this, the text says, the Council would consider "further measures", such as economic sanctions, "to ensure compliance".

Lavrov will seek at next week's discussions at the Security Council in New York to make sure any resolution calls for the investigation to be fair and objective, Kalmynin said.

Both U.S. President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have refused to rule out the possibility of military action against Syria, but said Washington has not exhausted its diplomatic options.



Russia, already at odds with the United States over its nuclear ties with Iran, had said before that U.S. terror accusations against Syria were hurting the Middle East peace process, and agreed to write off a huge chunk of Soviet-era debt held by Damascus earlier this year.

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