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## Putin: Assad fate not main concern

**Russian president seen to be distancing himself from Syrian counterpart as he says Syria's fate is more important.**

12/21/2012

Speaking at his annual press briefing in Moscow on Thursday, Putin said he wanted to ensure that any solution to the conflict in Syria must prevent the opposition and government forces just swapping roles and continuing to fight indefinitely.

"We are not concerned about the fate of Assad's regime. We understand what is going on there," Putin said.

"We are worried about a different thing - what next? We simply don't want the current opposition, having become the authorities, to start fighting the people who are the current authorities and become the opposition - and (we don't want) this to go on forever."

In his speech, Putin denied propping up Assad and stressed that Moscow was only seeking to avert a perpetual civil war.

### 'Not at any price'

"What is our position? Not to leave Assad's regime in power at any price, but to first (let the Syrians) agree among themselves how they should live next," Putin said.

"Only then should we start looking at ways to change the existing order."

Putin argued that Russia's call for dialogue was meant to avert "an endless civil war" between the armed rebels and government forces who still control most of the capital Damascus.

"We want to avoid (Syrian) disintegration," Putin said.

Putin's comments came less than a week after Russia's chief Middle East envoy said it appeared that Assad would not be able to fend off the rebels much longer.

The foreign ministry later denied an official shift in Russia's position toward Assad and noted that Moscow still recognised the Assad regime.

Russia remains one of Syrian regime's last major ally and has shielded Assad from UN sanctions aimed at punishing him for his use of heavy force against rebels.