

Russia Says Syria Ready to Join Talks

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The  **Moscow Times**

Syria has agreed to take part in Moscow-mediated talks on solving the country's crisis, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Monday, calling on the Syrian opposition to join the planned negotiations.

A senior member of the Syrian opposition council said, however, that it had not received an invitation from Moscow and that it would be refused anyway.

"If such an offer exists, it will be no more than an attempt to influence the Security Council. But I say clearly that our position has not changed, and it is that there is no dialogue with [President Bashar Assad]," said Abdel Baset Seda, a member of the Syrian council's executive committee.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said it hoped the opposition would agree. ☒

Moscow, a permanent United Nations Security Council member with veto powers, has offered to host the talks in an effort to end the bloodshed since protests began 10 months ago against President Bashar Assad.

"We have received a positive response from the Syrian authorities to our call [to hold talks in Moscow]," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement on its website. "We hope ... that the Syrian opposition will agree to that in the next few days, putting the interests of the Syrian people above all other concerns."

Moscow's offer of talks may be an attempt to strengthen its arguments against a Western draft resolution at the Security Council supporting an Arab League call for Assad to cede power.

Russia has said Assad's resignation must not be a precondition for the Syrian peace process. It has remained one of Assad's few allies and has supplied him with arms and ammunition during the protests.

Moscow has repeatedly said Assad's opponents share the blame for the bloodshed. It fears a Western resolution could be interpreted broadly enough to lead to a Libyan-style military intervention, which Russia says it will not allow.

Russia submitted its own draft resolution in December, but Western diplomats said they could not accept Russian wording assigning blame to the government and opposition for the violence, which the United Nations says has killed more than 5,000 people.

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