

Syria Says Ready to Talk With Armed Opposition

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The  **Moscow Times**

Syria is ready for talks with its armed opponents, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem said in Moscow on Monday, in the clearest offer yet of negotiations with rebels fighting to overthrow President Bashar Assad.

But Moualem said at the same time that Syria would pursue its fight "against terrorism," alluding to the conflict with rebels in which the United Nations says 70,000 people have been killed.

"We are ready for dialogue with everyone who wants it ... Even with those who have weapons in their hands. Because we believe that reforms will not come through bloodshed but only through dialogue," Moualem said, Itar-Tass reported.

He was speaking in Moscow at a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Russia is a staunch ally of Assad.

Moaz Alkhatib, head of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, said in Cairo that he had not had any contacts about talks with Damascus, but had postponed trips to Russia and the United States "until we see how things develop."

Syria's government and the political opposition have both suggested in recent weeks that they are prepared for some contacts — softening their previous outright rejection of talks to resolve a conflict that has driven nearly a million Syrians out of the country and left millions more homeless and hungry.

But the opposition has said any political solution must be based on the removal of Assad, whose family has ruled Syria since 1970. Rebel fighters, who do not answer to Alkhatib, are even more insistent that Assad must go before any talks start.

Damascus has rejected any preconditions for talks aimed at ending the violence.

The two sides also differ on the location for any talks, with the opposition saying they should be abroad or in rebel-held parts of Syria. Assad's government says any serious dialogue must be held on Syrian territory under its control.

Adding to the difficulty of any negotiated settlement is the lack of influence that Syria's political opposition — mostly operating outside the country — has over rebels inside.

"We are following the development of events ... with alarm," Lavrov said. "In our evaluation the situation is at a kind of crossroads. There are those who have set a course for further bloodshed and an escalation of conflict. This is fraught with the risk of the collapse of the Syrian state and society.

"But there are also reasonable forces that increasingly acutely understand the need for the swiftest possible start of talks ... In these conditions, the need for the Syrian leadership to continue to consistently advocate the start of dialogue, and not allow provocations to prevail, is strongly increasing."

Lavrov's warning that the Syrian state could founder appeared aimed at showing that Russia is pressing Assad's government to seek a negotiated solution while continuing to lay much of the blame for the persistent violence on his opponents.

Russia has distanced itself from Assad and has stepped up its calls for dialogue as his prospects of retaining power have decreased, but insists that his exit must not be a precondition.

Itar-Tass did not report any other comments by Syria's Moualem on the chances for talks or on any conditions attached.

"What's happening in Syria is a war against terrorism," he said. "We will strongly adhere to a peaceful course and continue to fight against terrorism."

Assad, announcing plans last month for a national dialogue to address the crisis, said there would be no dialogue with people he called traitors or "puppets made by the West."

Moualem made his remarks a day after U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry began a nine-nation

tour of European and Arab nations in which the Syria conflict will be a main focus.

Kerry plans to meet Lavrov in Berlin on Tuesday and Syrian opposition leaders at a conference in Rome on Thursday, although it is unclear whether all will attend amid internal rows over the value of such international meetings while violence goes on.

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