

Plans for Syria Prisoner Swap, Lavrov Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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MONTREUX — Russia, the U.S. and the UN are devising a plan for a prisoner swap between the two sides in war-torn Syria, Russia's foreign minister has said.

An exchange of prisoners should increase mutual trust between the government and the opposition, Sergei Lavrov said on the first day of a long-awaited conference on Syria's civil war.

Direct negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition are set to go ahead on Jan. 24, Lavrov said. The peace negotiations are expected to last between seven and 10 days.

"We have launched a very complicated, difficult process," Lavrov said Wednesday. "For the first time in three years of this bloody conflict ... the parties have agreed to sit down at the negotiating table despite all the accusations made against each other.

"There is certainty that despite all the emotionally charged statements from both Syrian delegations, the talks will begin."

Lavrov met with the heads of the two delegations: Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, who represents the government, and Ahmad Jarba, leader of the National Coalition, Syria's main Western-backed opposition group in exile.

"They both assured me that they would try to conduct negotiations with the aim of reaching certain agreements. I'm not going to speculate right now on how successful they will be," Lavrov said.

He said that Russia would insist on bringing all major Syrian opposition groups to the talks to ensure that any agreements reached are supported by as many political forces as possible.

The Geneva 2 peace conference bringing together Syria's warring parties and top global diplomats began Wednesday in the Swiss city of Montreux.

The conference's organizers hope it will lead to the formation of a transitional government for Syria, where at least 100,000 have been killed in civil strife since 2011, although President Bashar Assad has shown no sign of intending to step aside.

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