

U.S. and Russia Bring Meeting Forward as Syria Talks Falter

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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GENEVA — International mediator Lakhdar Brahimi scrambled to keep diplomacy alive on Wednesday, bringing forward to Thursday a meeting with senior U.S. and Russian officials backing opposing sides in Syria's war.

Brahimi first met Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov, who was holding separate talks later with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem in Geneva, diplomats said.

A opposition source said the National Coalition met with the Russian ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva on Tuesday evening as involvement by Moscow, President Bashar Assad's ally, is stepped up after two days of talks ended with no progress.

Brahimi, the UN envoy, began a joint session with the delegations of the Syrian government and opposition at midday on Wednesday, a UN statement said.

But the two sides remain far apart in their approach to talks sponsored by their respective backers — Russia and the U.S.

"The process is going to have to gain substance if there is going to be a real exchange," a Western diplomat said.

"The real question is can the process here address the problem of violence and get at the root cause by implementing the Geneva Communiqué," he said, referring to the roadmap agreed by world powers in June 2012 that calls for the two warring sides to set up a transitional governing body.

Brahimi is now due to meet U.S. Under Secretary Wendy Sherman and Gatilov on Thursday, a day earlier than planned, in a sign that the envoy is hoping the two powers can bring pressure to bear on their respective allies.

Brahimi said on Tuesday he aimed to discuss the key issues of violence and establishment of a transitional governing body in parallel. However, Damascus says it wants to address the issue of "terrorism" first and political transition later.

Meanwhile, negotiations in the UN have stalled over a resolution on humanitarian aid access in Syria, with Russia saying Wednesday that it would veto a draft of the text in its current form and denouncing it as an effort to lay a foundation for military strikes against Assad's government.

Moscow had already dismissed the Western-Arab draft debated in the Security Council on Tuesday as a nonstarter, but a senior diplomat's unequivocal condemnation indicated Russia would seek major changes before dropping its opposition.

"Its whole purpose and aim is to create grounds for future military action against the Syrian government if some demands it includes are not met," Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said of the draft, according to RIA Novosti.

"It is unacceptable to us in the form in which it is now being prepared, and we, of course, will not let it through."

Since the civil war began in Syria in 2011, Russia and China have vetoed three Western-backed Security Council resolutions condemning Assad's government and threatening it with sanctions.

Russia says that it is not trying to prop up Assad but that he must not be forced out by foreign powers, and adamantly opposes Western military intervention.

At the UN on Tuesday, French Ambassador Gerard Araud told reporters that Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin told the council that Moscow was prepared to work on some kind of resolution on aid access, but not the present draft.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday that Moscow would consider a draft resolution only if it was "not about one-sided accusations" against Syria's government.

The draft condemns rights abuses by Syrian authorities and armed groups, and demands that

the government stop all aerial bombardment of cities and towns as well as the indiscriminate use of bombs, rockets and related weaponry. It also condemns "increased terrorist attacks," and calls for the withdrawal of all foreign fighters from Syria.

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